EYE OF WISDOM

SWAMI RAMAKRISHNANANDA PURI

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Swami Ramakrishnananda Puri

Mata Amritanandamayi Center
San Ramon, CA

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by Swami Ramakrishnananda Puri

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DEDICATION

I humbly offer this book at the
Lotus Feet of my beloved Satguru,
Sri Mata Amritanandamayi Devi

sarvagaṁ saccid-ātmānaṁ jñāna-cakṣurnirīkṣate
ajñāna-cakṣurnekṣeta bhāsvantaṁ bhānum-andhavat

The Atma, which is all-pervading existence-consciousness, is seen by one who has the eye of wisdom.

One whose vision is obscured by ignorance does not perceive it, just as a blind man does not see the shining sun.

—Atma Bodha (65)

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Preface

A couple of years ago. during Amma's Australian lour. I was talking to a few of Amma's devotees while she was giving darshan some distance away. Suddenly, Amma called me over to her. When I went near her, she threw flower petals on me as a blessing and said. "Hey. today is your birthday, isn't it?"

I told Amma that I honestly didn't know. In India, one has not only a birth date but a birth star. This birth star comes once or sometimes twice a month. One celebrates one's birthday on the day of one's birth star, in the month in which one was born. Thus the actual date of one's birthday is different from year to year. While I had told Amma my birth star before. I had never once in all these years told Amma. or anyone else in the ashram, my birthday. And. though I have seen so many proofs of Amma's all-knowing nature over the years. I was still astonished that she would have known it. and deeply touched that she would think to mention it. As Amma gave me darshan and presented me with an apple for my birthday, I was reminded of the scriptural declaration that a true master can see the past, present and future of all living beings. And while Amma would never make such a bold declaration about herself, in her inimitable ever-understated, blink-and-you'll-miss-it style, she was letting me know that she doesn't miss a beat, and never has.

It was then that I first began to consider writing a book about the way Amma sees the world. Of course, I cannot be considered an authoritative source on the subject; one can never really expect to understand or explain exactly how anyone else sees the world, let alone a spiritual master of Aromas caliber. And yet, in 30 years of living with Amma, sitting at her feet, watching her from afar, and receiving her guidance on matters small and large, I feel that I have something to offer on the subject, however limited it may be. Through hints, through inference, through experience, I have begun to fit together the pieces of the puzzle. This much I know for certain: hers is truly a vision from beyond—beyond anything we can comprehend, beyond anything we have dreamed, beyond any *things* all. Certainly it is beyond words. Even still. Amma tries to explain it to us, and we would do well to try to understand.

In the *Bhagauad Gita.* Sri Krishna says,

ascaryavat pasyati kascid-enam
ascaryavat vadati tathaiva canyah
ascaryavavaccainam anyah srnoti
srutvapyenam veda na caiva kakit (2.29)

One beholds the Atrna (True Self) as a wonder;
another mentions it as a wonder; another again hears of it as a wonder; though hearing yet another knows it not at all

Between the morning and evening programs in Seattle during Amma s most recent North American Tour, we stayed at a devotee s apartment overlooking a beautiful lake, behind which loomed the snow-capped Mount Rainier. When Amma's attendant saw this sight, she left the windows open so that Amma could also get a glimpse of this picturesque view. But when Amma came into the room and her attendant tried to get her to look at the mountain, she didn't even look up from the letter she was reading.

Her attendant insisted, "Amma, please just take a look. It won't even take a minute. It's so pretty."

Finally, Amma replied, "For Amma, both the outside and the inside are beautiful."

In truth, there is nothing more beautiful and blissful than the Atma. For a true master like Amma who is reveling in the Self, nothing else is needed.

Swami Ramakrishnananda Puri
Amritapuri
27 September 2007

Sri Mata Amritanandamayi Devi: AN INTRODUCTION

Through her extraordinary acts of love and self-sacrifice, Sri Mata Amritanandamayi Devi, or Amma (Mother) as she is more commonly known, has endeared herself to millions around the world. Tenderly caressing everyone who comes to her, holding them close to her heart in a loving embrace, Amma shares her boundless love with all—regardless of their beliefs, who they are or why they have come to her. In this simple yet powerful way, Amma is transforming the lives of countless people, helping their hearts to blossom, one embrace at a time. In the past 36 years, Amma has physically hugged more than 26 million people from all pans of the world.

Her tireless spirit of dedication to uplifting others has inspired a vast network of charitable activities, through which people are discovering the deep sense of peace and inner fulfillment that comes from selflessly serving others. Amma teaches that the Divine exists in everything, sentient and insentient. Perceiving this underlying unity in all things is not only the essence of spirituality but also the means to end all suffering.

Amma's teachings are universal. Whenever she is asked about her religion, she replies that her religion is Love. She does not ask anyone to believe in God or to change their faith, but only to inquire into their own real nature and to believe in themselves.

CHAPTER 1

The Real 20/20 Vision

"Every man takes the limits of his own field of vision for the limits of the world "

—Arthur Schopenhauer

There is so much isolation and division in the world today that we have even begun to take it for granted. And yet, the concept of a utopian human civilization that existed in the distant past, or will return in the not-so-distant future, is something quite familiar to all of us. There are, *of* course, the stories *of* the mythic island of Atlantis, hid- den forever beneath the sea. There is the fictional legend of Shangri-la, a valley of peace and harmony utterly secluded from the outside world. The Greek poets had their Golden Age. And the Hindu Puranas divide human history into four yugas, or ages, the most ancient being the *Satya Yaga* (the Age of Truth) in which human beings lived in perfect harmony with one another and with nature, and peace reigned supreme. But while the concept of Satya Yuga is not a myth, it was a very long time ago.

Even so, we all want to see a world free from war, social unrest, corruption, disease, poverty and famine. Ironically, at present such situations are virtually the only things we sec in the news from every corner of the globe. There is a

tremendous gap between the ideals that humankind has set for itself and the reality of the world around us.

With todays technology, we are literally living in a global village. But there are so many people in the world with so many conflicting interests, aims and ideals, that the greatest challenge of our time is for us to simply learn how to live in harmony with one another. Technology has made the world a smaller place, but it cannot cure the cultural and ideological conflicts that have resulted from our newfound proximity to one another. At this rate, it seems that the once-playful words of Ralph Waldo Emerson— " *The end of the human race will be that it will eventually die of civilization.* "—may prove to be more prophetic than anyone of his time might have imagined.

This divisiveness is present not only among diverse nations and peoples but even among immediate family members. In a magazine, I once came across the following letter written by a little girl:

> *"Dear God.*
>
> *I bet it is very hard for You to love all of everybody in the whole world. There are only four people in our family and I cant always love all of them. "*

Amma says, "If there are four people in a family, each one lives as though on an isolated island. There is no heartfelt

communication between them." To illustrate this point, she tells the following story.

A family of three shared only one car between them. One evening, the father wanted to go see a movie, the mother wanted to go shopping and their son wanted to go to a concert. Each one tried to convince the others to go according to his or her own desire. Finally an argument broke out among them, and in the end no one went anywhere. In feet, an easy solution was available: the son could have dropped his father at the cinema, his mother at the shopping mall, gone to the concert and then picked them both up on the way home. But because none of them was even willing to consider the validity' of the others' desires, the practical solution eluded them.

There are some people who are able to see the big picture in life—the macro-perspective—but their preoccupation with it often leads them to overlook the little things that make such a difference: a loving smile, a consoling word or a thoughtful action. About such a person, it has been said. “Sure, he loves humanity, but he hates people."

Others tend to see the micro-perspective, but their preoccupation with it often gives them a narrow outlook on life, and they focus too much on one task or one area, without taking into account its interrelation with everything else.

Amma tells a story to illustrate this point: Once, a man was given the job of painting the white lines down the middle of a highway. On his first day he painted six miles; the next day three miles; the following day less than a mile. When the foreman asked the new worker why he kept painting less each day, he replied with frustration, “I just can’t do any better. Each day I keep getting farther away from the can of paint."

Likewise, most of us can sec the world only from our own perspective, not from anyone else ; neither can we see the whole. Whereas, Amma sees the whole, and at the same time her awareness flows to each and every individual as a pan of that whole. This holistic vision, or *samashti drishti,* is not simply a matter of focusing on the big rather than the small. It is based on the fundamental spiritual principle that the Supreme Consciousness pervades the Universe as the One Life Thread, the *Sutratma,* stringing together all beings and all things. “Love is the manifestation of the True Self," Amma says. “It is love that strings the entire creation together in one single thread. That's why it is said that God is love."

In the *Bhagavad Gita.* Sri Krishna says,

mattah parataram nanyat kimcid asti dhanamjaya
mayi sarvam idam protam sutre manigana iva

(7.7)

There is nothing whatsoever higher than Me,
O Dhananjaya.
All this is strung on Me, as rows of gems on a string.

From her universal perspective, Amma says that the problems we see evident in the world today are just the tangible manifestations of the problems within the minds of individual human beings. We often forget that the whole is merely an amalgamation of the parts, including each and every one of us. "Society is comprised of individuals." Amma tells us. “It is the conflict in the individual mind that manifests outwardly as war. When individuals change, society will automatically change. Just as hatred and revenge fulness exist in the mind, peace and love can also exist in the mind." And in her address at the United Nations in 2000, Amma pointed out that “the conflict in society comes from the conflict within the individual.”

The determining factor in the quality of the world we live in, then, is the mind of each individual. The invisible seeds of the world’s concrete problems exist in the hearts of human beings. Thus, in addition to treating the physical symptoms evident on the surface layer of society, it is equally important to examine the source of these problems within ourselves. If the conflict in our minds can be resolved, then human beings everywhere can enjoy much greater peace and prosperity.

When we go to get our eyesight checked, we are shown charts of letters and numbers from across the room. Our vision is then rated according to how well we can see at a distance of 20 feet, versus how well a person with perfect

vision can see at that distance. This measurement is called the Snellen fraction, named after the Dutch ophthalmologist Hermann Snellen, who developed the classic letter chart in 1863. Since then, people have come to recognize that the Snellen fraction “20/20" means perfect eyesight.

Snellen determined the size of the letters on his test chart by comparing the eyesight of a large number of his patients with that of his assistant, who could see distant objects very clearly. However, historical accounts don’t explain how Snellen knew his assistant had “perfect" eyesight. This means that our standard of perfect vision is based on the visual acuity of just one man, who was more or less arbitrarily chosen for his proximity to the scientist developing the system of measurement. And yet, everyone accepts Snellen’s measurement as the perfect standard of our clarity and strength of vision.

Similarly, we all accept that there is a perfect, common-sense way of looking at the world around us—despite the fact that we know that our human senses are very limited. Even within the immediate radius of our physical body, there is so much of which we are unaware. On many levels, even dogs display more awareness of their surroundings. There are sound frequencies undetectable by the human ear that a dog can hear clearly; a dog can detect a spectrum of odors which is non-existent as far as we are concerned. And in India it is even said that a dog can see subtle beings

that are invisible to the human eye; this explains why dogs sometimes bark for no apparent reason.

There is also the little-known fact that relative to the number of human casualties, almost no animals were injured in the 2004 Asian tsunami. All over South Asia, the animals seemed to sense the catastrophe coming and made for higher ground. In several cases, tourists at wildlife parks observed elephants heading for the hills and thought it prudent to follow in their footsteps; this decision made all the difference between life and death.

It is clear that in certain ways, animals have more finely developed sensory skills than our own. And certainly we can accept that there are individuals who have sensory skills more finely tuned than our own. Just as there may be human beings with better vision than Hermann Snellens assistant, then, isn't it possible that there are human beings who have a more advanced way of looking at the world?

From a practical standpoint, we can easily sec that Amma's way of looking at the world is far more efficient, beneficial and for-reaching than our own. Amma sees her own consciousness in everyone. "You are not different from me," she says. "You and I are one." Because of this perspective, Amma is perfectly at peace in all situations, and she is able to impart that peace to everyone she meets. When we don't see any difference between ourselves and others, how can we hate them? How can we judge them? We can

only love them. Seeing everyone as an extension of her self. Amma can only reach out to caress and comfort each person she comes across. Regardless of the seeming external differences, there is one underlying Consciousness. Amma explains. “Whatever the color of the cow, milk is always white. Likewise, irrespective of the culture and character of the person, the illuminating Consciousness is one and the same." Amina’s vision of oneness is in fact, the essence of spirituality. It is a vision that Amma wants for us all, because she knows that perceiving this reality is the only thing that will bring us peace—both as individuals and as a world.

In this world of so much violence, hatred, religious strife and cultural clashes, whose perspective is more perfect—our world of difference and division, or the *mahatma?* world of unity and oneness? I propose that it is the mahatmas who have the real 20/20 vision, and it is against their gold standard that we all must measure our outlook on life. In this way. we can certainly broaden our perspective and begin to see the world—and ourselves—with crystal clarity.

' Literally, “great soul." Though the term is now used more broadly, in this book mahatma refers to one who abides in the knowledge that he or she is one with the Universal Self, or Atma.

*

CHAPTER 2

Castles of Sand and Stone

"Reality is merely an illusion, although a very persistent one. "

-Albert Einstein

"I dreamed I was a butterfly, flitting around in the sky: then I awoke. Now I wonder: Am I a man who dreamt of being a butterfly, or am I a butterfly dreaming that I am a man?"

—Chuang Tzu

An airline pilot with poor eyesight had managed to pass his periodic vision exams by memorizing the eye charts beforehand. One year, though, his doctor used a new chart that the pilot had never seen before. The pilot proceeded to recite the old chart, and the doctor realized that shed been hoodwinked.

In fact, the pilot proved to be nearly blind. The doctor could not contain her curiosity. "How could someone with your eyesight manage to pilot a plane at all?"

"Oh, everything's fully automated these days. The flight computer knows our destination, and all I have to do is hit the autopilot and the plane pretty much flies itself."

"I can understand that," replied the doctor. "What about the take-off?"

" That s simple. I just aim the plane down the runway, go to full throttle, pull back on the stick, and off we go!"

"But I still don't see how you land!" protested the doctor.

"Oh, that's the easiest part of all. All I do is use the airports radio beacon to get us on the proper glide path. Then I just throttle down, wait for the co-pilot to scream in terror, pull the nose up and the plane lands just fine."

Each of us has our own way of seeing and evaluating our experiences and the people and the objects of the world. But in fact, while our perspective may be perfectly true for us, it may not be so for others. Two different people in the same surroundings may exist in very different worlds indeed.

I'he scriptures of *Sanatana Dharma*[2] describe three levels of reality. These are *pratibhasika satta* (apparent reality), *vyavaharika satta* (empirical or relative reality), and *paramarthika satta* (absolute reality). For our purposes, let us refer to them as the subjective, objective, and the ultimate realities.

Subjective reality refers to experiences that have reality only for the experiencer and for no one else. Examples of subjective reality include dreams, hallucinations, and visions. One persons subjective reality can be entirely different from another's; what seems real for one person will not even enter the imagination of another.

***" "The Eiernal Way of Life." The original and traditional name for I iinduiun.**

Once, a psychiatrist at a mental hospital was evaluating his long-term patients to see if they were ready to re-enter society. “So, I see by your chart that you’ve been recommended for discharge,” the doctor said to one of his patients. “Do you have any idea what you might do once you’re released?"

“Well, I went to school for mechanical engineering," the patient replied thoughtfully. “That’s still a good field. On the other hand, I thought I might write a book about my experiences here in the hospital.”

The doctor nodded approvingly.

The patient continued, “People might be interested in reading a book like that. In addition, I thought I might go back to college and study art history."

The doctor nodded again, commenting, “Yes, those all sound like intriguing possibilities."

I'he patient, however, had not finished. “And the best part is, in my spare time, I can continue being a teapot."

Subjective reality is entirely personal; proximity makes no difference. A dream or a vision that seems very real to one person will not have any reality for another person, though he may be sitting right next to the dreamer. We have all had the experience of having an extremely vivid dream. But when we try to share that dream with another person, we often find that the other person is not particu-

larly interested. This is because for the listener, the dream has no basis in reality; it is merely a figment of our own imagination.

Objective reality is what most people experience in their day-to-day life. If we are sitting in a chair, we understand that it is a chair and not a space shuttle. Likewise, everyone can feel the heat of fire—no one will run inside a burning house. This is objective reality. When someone tells you to accept reality, they are telling you to accept the objective reality of the world as most people see and experience it. Most people would say that objective reality is the only reality—the only game in town.

However, the scriptures say that objective reality is not absolute—it is only relatively real, and it is only because everyone is looking at the world from the standpoint of the physical body that objective reality is touted as the supreme reality. Everyone has the common reference point of the physical body. And from the standpoint of the physical body, it is true that this world is real. But if we shift to another point of view, it becomes unreal. For example, from the point of view of the dreamer, the waking world has no reality at all.

Of course, no one takes seriously the reference point of the dreamer, except to feel sympathy for one who is having a nightmare. But there is another reference point that is

worth taking seriously. That is the reference point of the mahatmas. It is the third level of reality described in the scriptures—paramarthika satta, or absolute reality.

Both subjective and objective reality are entirely dependent on the absolute reality—they could not exist without it, for it is their substratum, but it is also beyond them. As you read this book, you are conscious of your own body and the book. You may even be grateful that you have two hands to hold the book and eyes to read the words. But how many of us remember that it is light that really allows us to read? In the same way, it is the absolute reality that makes all forms of perception possible. In its absence, everything will be absent. At the same time, the absolute reality itself is beyond perception.

Let's look at it from another angle, taking the example of golden jewelry and the element of gold. Gold is the substratum of all golden jewelry—without the gold, the golden jewelry would not exist. At the same time, the gold transcends the jewelry. Whether or not the jewelry exists, the gold remains. Thus, as far as the jewelry is concerned, gold is the absolute reality. The ornamental shapes of the jewelry—ring, necklace, bracelet—are only relatively real.

Amma says, "I don't differentiate between rhe material and the spiritual. The waves and the ocean are not two. The product is no different from the material out of which it is made. It is but the same substance in a different form.

Likewise, the Creator and the creation are not two—they are one."

With reference to the body, mind and intellect, the Pure Consciousness that enlivens them—the Atma—is the absolute reality. If Consciousness is present, the body, mind and intellect can also function. Without Consciousness, the body, mind and intellect cannot even exist, much less function. But even when the body, mind and intellect disappear. Consciousness remains. In the *Bhagavad Gita.* Sri Krishna declares,

> *aham atma gudakesa sarva-bhutasya-sthitah*
> *aham adisca madhyam ca bhutanam anta eva ca*
>
> I am the Ultimate Consciousness, O Arjuna
> Situated within the heart of all living beings.
> I am the beginning, the middle and the end of all
> living beings.
>
> (10.20)

It is this eternal nature of Consciousness that allows the *rishis* (seers) to refer to the Atma as absolutely real. They developed a simple, logical test to determine if something could be called true, or real, in the ultimate sense. Only if it exists unchanged in all three periods of time—past, present and future—can it be called real. Everything else is only temporary, or "relatively real." Thus when we pray, "Lead us from untruth to Truth," we are praying that we develop the capacity to raise our awareness from our

present level of relative reality—untruth—to the level of Pure Consciousness, or the Supreme Truth.

When we are immersed in a drcam, we are totally unaware of the waking world. But when we wake up, we realize that the drcam was not real at all, but only seemed real to us at the time. Further, we realize that everything and everyone in the dream world was created by us alone.

We know that the one who was the dreamer is now the same one who is awake, because we remember what we did and experienced in the drcam. If it were two different entities, we would never remember our dreams. Of course, we cannot remember all our dreams, but that does not mean that we are different from the dreamer. Just because we cannot recall the experience of our birth, we don't say that we were never born. After all, can we remember everything we did just yesterday?

When we are immersed in the dream, we are convinced that the dream world is the only reality. It is only when we awaken that we become completely unidentified with the dream and become completely identified with our physical body and the world around us. Heaving a sigh of relief, we tell ourselves, "Oh, I'm so glad that wasn't real!"

This same concept applies to our waking life. At present, we are utterly convinced that the waking world is all there really is. But when we realize the absolute reality, which is the basis for the relative reality in which we are now

established, we realize that we are not a limited individual but we are Reality itself, and we ourselves have created this entire waking world. This does not mean the waking world then disappears—as the dream world does for the one who awakens from his slumber—but that we can see the inherent unity pervading the apparent diversity of the waking world.

One day a king was surveying the borders of his kingdom; on one side of the kingdom was the sea. The king stopped for a moment to watch two boys building sand castles on the beach. They suddenly got into an argument; one of the boys kicked over the sand castle of the other. Seeing the king standing at a distance, the other boy went and complained about the injustice. The king laughed at the boy for becoming so upset over a couple of sand castles. He continued laughing until his spiritual adviser remarked. “When you fight wars and spend sleepless nights worrying over stone castles, how can you laugh at these boys for fighting over sand castles?"

For the children, the sand castles seemed to be the ultimate reality, whereas the king ascribed absolute reality to castles of stone. The children were established in subjective reality, whereas the king was established in objective reality. But for the master who has realized the absolute reality, both these realities are equally unreal—they are both a kind of dream state.

When we are immersed in the objective reality, the physical world of names and forms is very real, and welook upon the dreams we had the night before as unreal. But for the dreamer, the waking world is not real. And for a person in deep sleep, neither drcam nor waking world have any relevance or reality. Thus the only absolute reality is pure consciousness, the "I" that witnesses all three of the ordinary states of awareness—waking, dreaming and deep sleep. That is why the absolute reality of Pure Consciousness is also called the Atma, or True Self in ail living beings.

There is a true story from Tamil Nadu about another king who learned a lesson yet more entrusted one of his ministers to purchase several well-bred horses. But the minister, being a staunch devotee of Lord Shiva, spent the money instead on charity and temple renovations. When the king discovered this transgression, he immediately imprisoned the devout minister.

Shortly thereafter, when the monsoon arrived, one of the rivers in his kingdom began to overflow its boundaries. The king declared a state of emergency and ordered that one person from each house do their part to help reinforce the mud walls along the river's edge in order to prevent the kingdom from being deluged. One elderly woman was compelled to participate, as she was the only person remaining in her household. However, being too old to do manual labor and unable to find a replacement, she prayed to her beloved Lord Shiva to help her in some way.

Almost despairing, she looked up and saw a stranger standing before her. Though she had lived in the small kingdom all her life, she had never seen him before. The elderly woman approached him and said, “Young man, please do my share of the work and relieve me of my burden; it will be nothing for you."

The man replied, “I will not work for free. You must offer me something in return."

The poor old woman had nothing to offer but the*puttu* (rice and coconut dish) she prepared each day to eke out a living for herself. When she explained this to the man, he said, “That is enough. Feed me, and I will work for you."

So she brought the man to her house and fed him a big breakfast. After eating, he went to the riverbank, but then, instead of doing his part, he simply stood and gossiped with others, distracting them from their work as well. Noticing this, one of the work supervisors drew the attention of the king. The king immediately approached the man and began to beat him with a stick.

The man did not protest, but a funny thing happened: the moment the stick made contact with his flesh, everyone felt the pain—as if the wood had lashed their own skin. The entire citizenry—including the king himself—cried out in pain.

Utterly bewildered, the king stepped back from (he strange young man and let him go on his way. After a few steps, he disappeared into thin air.

Seeing this, the king understood that he had received a visit from the Lord himself, and that God was showing that his Consciousness is present in all living beings. Further, he felt that the Lord had indirectly rebuked him for his ill treatment of his pious minister. The king left the work site and made straight for the prison, where he ordered that his minister be released and reinstated. Upon the ministers release, the king acknowledged, "I thought the palace funds belonged to me, and that was why I punished you. But now I realize that everything belongs to God, and you had in fact spent the money in the right way."

When we know that our True Self is Pure Consciousness—that we are one with God—we know that whatever happens in the three states of deep sleep, dream and waking can never affect or limit who we really are. This freedom from time and space, or *jivanmukti,* is the source of limidess peace and bliss, and it is the goal of the human soul.

CHAPTER 3

Rising Above Relative Reality

"Only one who is awake can awaken others. ”

—Amma

"The last of the human freedoms, to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, is to choose one's own way."

-Victor Frank!

Once, a man who had recently arrived in a foreign country went to the marketplace. There he saw an attractive fruit he had never seen before. Sure that it would be delicious, he purchased a bag of the fruits and sat on a park bench to enjoy his find. With great enthusiasm, he bit into the first one but found that it was terribly hot and spicy. Casting it aside, he thought, “Maybe I got a bad one. Let me try another.” This one, too, was equally fiery. Licking his burning lips, he decided to try his luck and bite into a third. He met with the same fate. Thinking maybe the top of the batch was bad, he began to work his way up from the bottom. Each one was hotter than the last, and tears began running down his face. However, the man persisted, and only after working his way through the entire bunch

of chilies was he forced to conclude that this new “fruit" was not what he had thought it would be.

We may laugh at the man s folly, but aren’t we similarly unable or unwilling to learn from our mistakes? We, too, go on trying to achieve satisfaction through one thing after another. And in the end, just as in the beginning, we are rewarded with nothing more than bitter fruit.

Swami Purnamritananda, one of Ammas senior disciples, relates the following anecdote. One day, he was translating for Amma when a person came to her with a look of despair and utmost sorrow. When Amma asked him what the problem was, the man explained that he had been searching for a job for months and was unable to find one anywhere, and now he was even thinking of committing suicide. Amma consoled him and asked him to sit by her side. Some time later, another despondent person explained to Amma that he had so much tension at work and financial pressure that he thought it would be better to die. Amma wiped away his tears and asked him to sit near her. After a while, a teary-eyed couple came to Amma and explained that even after years of medical consultations they had been unable to bear a child. And soon after that, another couple came to Amma with heavy hearts, saying their only child had disowned them and was even suing them in court. Later on, an older woman came to Amma crying that she had never found a husband and was afraid she was now too

old to attract a suitor. Finally, another woman came saying that her marriage had made her life a living hell.

Some of these people came to Amma wanting something, and others had something and wanted to get rid of it, but they all had one thing in common—they were unhappy, and they blamed their unhappiness on their present circumstances.

There is an ancient Roman parable about a donkey who was never satisfied. At first the donkey belonged to an herb merchant, but finding that his master gave him too little food and too much work, he petitioned the Roman god Jupiter to be released from his present service and provided with another master. Jupiter warned him that he would regret his request, but the donkey insisted, so Jupiter caused him to be sold to a mason. Shortly afterwards, finding that he had heavier loads to carry and harder work in the brickyard, he petitioned for another change of master. Jupiter told him that it would be the last time that he could grant such a request. The donkey agreed, and Jupiter ordained that he be sold to a tanner. Finding that he had fallen into even worse hands, the donkey brayed, “It would have been better for me to have been either starved by the one or to have been overworked by the other, than to have been bought by my present owner, who will tan my hide and make me useful to him even after I am dead."

In truth, no change in our external circumstances will bring us lasting peace and happiness. Every solution brings its own set of problems that require additional solutions.

I here are also cases where we encounter problems that have no external solution. We may find ourselves in circumstances which have no way out. Some readers may be familiar with the story of Victor Frankl, the Jewish psy- chiatrist who spent three years in the concentration camps during the Holocaust. Frank! lost his wife, his brother and his parents in the camps. From one day to the next, he never knew if he too would soon be executed. But Frankl realized that no matter what was taken away from him, whatever indignities and atrocities he was subjected to, he still retained what he later called “the last of the human freedoms." Even if every external freedom was taken away from him, he realized that his internal freedom was always his to retain or to surrender. By observing in a detached way everything he was put through, he could remain free to choose how to respond to it. He could choose to be affected or to remain unaffected. By remaining somewhat detached from his objective world—by seeing that it was only relatively real and that his inner awareness remained untouched—he was, to a certain extent, able to remain in control of his emotions and lend his psychiatric services to his fellow inmates. Throughout his time in the camps, he

was a beacon of hope and inspiration for other prisoners and even had a transformative effect on some of the camp's guards. As Victor Frank! discovered, the only real solution to the problem of human suffering is to rise above the relative reality of the objective world.

Amma says that when our neighbor has a problem, we are able to console them and advise them calmly. But when we find ourselves in a similar situation, we are overwhelmed. We need to be able to create the same kind of distance between ourselves and our problems that we have from the problems of our neighbors. The very process of creating this distance is equivalent to cultivating greater awareness. In truth, we are not the problems in our lives. Neither are we the body, mind and intellect, which are experiencing the problems. Our True Self is the Pure Consciousness which does not in itself experience anything, but makes the experience possible. This witnessing consciousness is itself the absolute reality. We need to learn to identify with the witnessing consciousness and become a witness to the problem, rather than identifying with the problem itself. This kind of continuous awareness will help us to identify with the absolute reality and avoid being overcome by the trials and tribulations of life on earth.

If we were able to enter the dream world without forgetting our wakeful state, we would remember that everyone

and everything in the dream is our own creation. If we were then to encounter someone within our dream who refused to believe that there was a wakeful person and a waking state, we would advise him to wake up and realize that he is, in fact, the one who is awake.

Similarly, we are not yet able to accept that there is another reality beyond this one, and that whatever we see, whatever we feel, whatever we experience, is all our own creation. Amma understands this and wants us to understand it as well, just like the one who is able to enter a dream without forgetting himself.

Recently, when Amma held a program in Trivandrum, almost all of the ashram residents made the three-hour commute for Ammas program there. The night before the program, Amma suddenly came out of her room at about 1:00 in the morning. She went room to room at the school where everyone was staying, turning on the lights and awakening all her sleeping children. Standing in the doorways, Amma sweetly asked her children to come out and work at the oceanside program venue for an hour or two. Thousands of chairs had to be set up for the program the next evening, and Amma knew that in the heat of the sun the following day it would be unbearable work. She didn't force anyone, but said that those who were inspired could get up and work. Normally, when someone awakens us in the middle of the night, we are not too happy to see

them, especially if they are asking us to get up and dig hundred-foot-long trenches in a sandy beach. But when Amma did the same thing, everyone was ecstatic. They knew that she was only doing it to spare them discomfort later on, and they willingly followed her instructions. This is Amma's secret. Her children are supremely confident that whatever Amma asks them to do is not for her benefit but for their own. This is why so many people follow in her footsteps. This is how she has been able to mobilize an army of devoted volunteers. When she calls us to awaken from our slumber, we know that she is calling us to a better, brighter world than the one we now inhabit.

Recendy, a two-week old baby was brought for Amma's darshan. Taking the sleeping baby in her arms, Amma proceeded to blow on its face. The baby did not react. Amma blew again, and again there was no reaction; the baby remained in deep slumber. But Amma would not give up—she continued blowing gently over this baby's eyes and face. Finally the baby's hands began to twitch. It seemed that it might begin to stir, but then it slipped back into deep, motionless sleep. Amma continued, and the baby's eyes opened a crack. Everyone around began to cheer, encouraging Amma's efforts and rooting for the baby to awaken and become aware of this blessed moment. But the baby's eyes closed again. Even so, Amma continued to blow. No matter how many times she failed, she never got

tired. She never gave up. Finally, the baby awakened and stared up into Amma's eyes with its own.

Amma has set her mind to awakening us, and no matter how long it takes, no matter how many times we begin to stir and then fall back into deep slumber, she is not going to give up. May we all awaken soon.

CHAPTER 4

Deconstructing Attraction

"One who conquers one s soul... toward him all other souls will be attracted. "

-Thiruvalluavr

Many years ago, before I joined the Ashram, a famous actress at the peak of her career gave an appearance near the place where I was staying. There were throngs of young people crowded around her, hoping for a chance to shake hands with her, get her autograph and have a photograph taken with her. Decades later, when I was on my way to conduct a program, I happened to pass by another venue where this actress was. However, now she was a senior citizen, and I noticed that except for a couple of paid secretaries, there was no one else around her. All the youngsters were crowding around another much younger actress. The young actress was aglow with all the attention and adoration being showered upon her, seemingly completely unaware that her fate would one day be the same as the one who came before her.

In our lives, we feel physically or emotionally attracted toward many things, places and people, but most of these attractions are temporary in nature. For example, we may be

attracted to a person because of their physical appearance. But when the physical beauty fades away, the attraction, too, disappears.

This doesn't mean that we should be overcome by sorrow thinking about the future. Rather, we can remember and gracefully accept the changing nature of the world. For in truth, it is only when we accept the changing nature of the world that we can work to attain that which is changeless, or our True Self. Not only that—Amma says, whether we laugh or cry, days will pass by, so we might as well laugh. With that in mind, I would like to share a joke.

Once a middle-aged woman had a heart attack and was taken to the hospital. While on the operating table she had a near-death experience. Seeing the grim reaper before her, she gulped, “Is my time up?"

Death replied, “Actually, no. You have another 43 years, two months and eight days to live." The woman was so overjoyed at this news that upon recovering from her surgery, she decided to stay in the hospital and have a face-lift, Botox injections and a tummy tuck. She even had someone come in and dye her hair and brighten her teeth. Since she had so much more time to live, she figured she might as well make the most of it. After her last operation, she was finally released from the hospital. While crossing the street on her way home, she was run over by an ambulance.

Seeing the grim reaper before her once again, she demanded, “I thought you said I had another 43 years

to live? Why didn’t you pull me out of the path of the ambulance?"

Death replied, “Sorry—I just didn’t recognize you.”

Of course, attraction may not be merely physical; we can also be attracted to someone because of their personality, talents or intellectual capacities. This kind of mental attraction may last longer than physical attraction, but it is also temporary. When two people get divorced due to “irreconcilable differences,” we know that the second type of attraction has also faded away.

Once, after a woman filed for divorce, her friend was trying to console her. Suddenly, the first woman said, “You know, I should have left him right after the honeymoon.”

“Why?” her friend asked.

“Because,” the first woman explained. “He promised to take me to Niagara Falls—but finally, all he did was drive us through a car wash a couple of times, real slow.”

There is a third type of attraction, however, which does not fade away. This is the attraction to the Atma or to the Supreme Self. This is the type of attraction we feel when we look at Amma. Most of us have to work so hard to keep people's attention. Even a comedian has to be continuously funny or people will stop listening and look away. But with Amma, this is not the case. No matter what she is saying or doing, people cannot take their eyes off her.

During one of Amma’s recent foreign tours, at the end of an evening darshan program. Amma was playing with

a couple of toys someone had given to her; she was using a slingshot to repeatedly launch a monkey doll flying through the air. Seeing this, everyone was overcome with laughter and delight. If I had been doing this, people might not have been so happy about it; they might have even informed Amma that there was something wrong with one of her swamis. But when Amma did the same thing, all the on-lookers were filled with so much happiness and joy.

Even when she is doing an ordinary action, everyone around her is riveted. One morning after darshan at her ashram in Madurai during her 2007 South Indian Tour, Amma decided to prepare a traditional Kerala sweet called *unniyappam.* As the ashramites and devotees traveling with Amma heard about it, they all gravitated toward the rooftop where she was frying the sweets. If anyone else was going to do the same thing, no one would volunteer to come and watch them do it—they would definitely be able to think of something else they would rather do. But for the next half an hour or so, 300 grown people simply watched Amma cook unniyappam. Not much was said—neither by Amma, nor by her children. Yet everyone was riveted. They hung on Amma's every movement, every gesture. What was so fascinating about it? Why was everyone so engrossed? On the surface, it was nothing but a woman cooking fried snacks. Of course, because of our attraction to Amma, whatever objects she uses, whatever place she is

in, whatever action she does becomes attractive. But why are we so attracted to Amma in the first place?

Amma herself answers this question. “When we see a ripe fruit, it always looks juicy and appealing. A fully bloomed flower looks so beautiful and attractive. Similarly, one who has known the true nature of the Self is like a fully bloomed flower or a fully ripe fruit."

Each of the divine qualities is like a petal of this fully bloomed flower. If we ask 10 people why they are attracted to Amma, sve might receive 10 different answers. Some are attracted to Aminas patience, others to her humility, others to her innocence, others to her purity, others to her compassion and others to her unconditional love. Still others are attracted to Amma because of her knowledge of the Atma or the True Self. In *Manase Nin Svantamayi,* a bhajan Amma often sings, it is said, "The Lord will attract devotion-soaked souls like a magnet attracts iron.”

In the same bhajan, it is revealed that in fact, it is always the soul that we are attracted to, and not the body that houses it. Amma sings, “Even the sweetheart for whom you have been struggling—without even caring for your life—will be frightened by the sight of your dead body and will not accompany you on your journey after death.” When the soul is no longer in the body, our attraction toward the body disappears. In fact, our natural attraction is to the soul; we love the body only because of the presence of the soul.

'I'here was an incident that took place during Amma's 2007 North American lour while we were at the airport on our way from Seattle to Amma's ashram in San Ramon, California. We were in the line for the security screening when the security officer came up to one of the Indian devotees traveling with us. Looking at her, he said, "Is it your face that I saw on the back of the bus in Seattle?" Slightly embarrassed, she told the man that she wasn't the lady but that the person he was referring to would be there in just a few' moments. Just then, Amma came in. joining one of the other lines for security screening, about 15 feet away from the guard's position. After the devotee pointed Amma out to the securin' officer, he asked innocently, "Would she really just hug me if I asked her to? She wouldn't think it was weird?"

I he devotee assured him that Amma would hug anyone who came to her, as she looks upon everyone as her child. Without taking his eyes off Amma. the security officer continued. What if I just wanted to hold her hand? Would she mind if I went up to her for a second and just held her hand?"

Again, the devotee told him it was no problem. His confidence bolstered, the security officer began to move in Amma's direction, but realizing that no one would do his job if he left his position, he finally resigned himself

to just watching Amma as she walked through security toward the gate.

The security officer couldn't help but stare at Amma until he couldn't see her anymore—he was mesmerized by Amma's presence. And even though the man was physi- cally left behind when Amma passed through rhe security checkpoint, his heart had taken wing. The only ticket he had needed was innocence.

Even though divinity is present in everyone, the degree to which that divinity is manifested corresponds to the individual s purity of mind. Because the mind of the mahatma is absolutely pure, the divinity shines through much more brightly than through the ordinary person. To explain this point, Amma uses the example of a low-watt bulb verses a 10,000-watt bulb. The electricity entering each bulb is the same; one just emits more light than the other. Likewise, a mahatma's mind is so pure, so peaceful, that even the minds of those near him or her experience that peace. It is like the theory of sympathetic vibration. Associating the peace experienced in our mind with the mahatma, we develop an attraction toward him. That attraction is verily the attraction of the Atma, our True Self. That is why the mahatma's physical features and other accomplishments are not important. One spiritual master did not do anything in particular. He simply sat, wearing

nothing hut a loincloth, not speaking much, until he was very old. But people never stopped coming to see him, as his very presence was filled with peace and love.

There is a story about the famous poet and freedom fighter Subrahmanya Bharati. He lived for some time in Pondicherry, wherein dwelled a homeless man who dressed in filthy rags and always carried a bundle of dirty clothing and rubbish over his shoulder. The towns people could not bear the sight of the homeless man, and if they saw him coming, they would always cross to the other side of the street or even chase him away. This poet, however, noticed a peculiar gleam in the man's eye and felt an unnamable power emanating from within him. One day the poet approached the man and humbly asked, "Though everyone here seems to be repulsed by you, I cannot help but feel there is more to you than meets the eye. Can you please tell me who you really are?"

The homeless man threw back his head and laughed merrily. Then he commented cryptically, "Ask me for something—anything you want. Then you will come to know who I am."

I hinking he had nothing to lose—and quite possibly, everything to gain—the poet confessed to the man his hearts most cherished desire. "More than anything," he confided, "I would like to see the Goddess Kali with my own eyes."

Follow me,' the homeless man nodded, and turning, walked away.

The poet, partly skeptical yet at the same time feeling a burgeoning anticipation, followed in the mans footsteps.

The man led him to the village well. There, he instructed rhe poet to look down into the water.

Without hesitation, the poet followed his instructions and stood transfixed. There on the surface of the water, instead of seeing his own face reflected, he saw the image of Kali in all her resplendent glory. Finally the image faded, and the poet looked back up at the man in a whole new light. “Your external appearance is so disheveled and distasteful," the poet confessed. “And yet, you verily earn' the gods within you."'

“Externally, I am dirty,” the mahatma said matter-of-factly. "But within. I am pure. Thus I can see God, and I can show him to others as well." So saying, he laughed again, as if it was all a delightful game, and went on his solitary way.

Amma says that whether we know it or not, someone is always taking us as a role model. (It is wise to remember this when choosing our words and actions.) Likewise, we tend to emulate those to whom we are attracted. We may imitate their hairstyle, their way of walking, their style of dress, etc. This imitation can also extend to lifestyle choices

and life-changing decisions. When a popular celebrity is seen smoking, cigarette sales skyrocket among young people. When a terrible crime is committed, copycat cases tend to be carried out in the days afterward. Obviously, then, it can be dangerous to imitate others.

A missionary recruit went to a Spanish-speaking country for the first time. In an effort to learn Spanish, he visited one of the local churches and sat in the front row. So as not to make a fool of himself, he decided to pick someone out of the crowd to imitate. He chose the man sitting next to him in the front pew. As the choir sang, the man clapped his hands, so the missionary recruit clapped, too. When the man stood up to pray, the missionary recruit stood up, too. When the man sat down, the missionary sat down.

Later in the service, the man next to him stood up again, so the missionary stood up, too. Suddenly a hush fell over the entire congregation. A few people gasped. The missionary looked around and saw that no one else was standing.

After the service ended, the missionary recruit greeted the preacher. “I take it you don't speak Spanish," the preacher remarked.

The missionary replied, “No, I don’t. Is it that obvious?"

“Well, it wasn’t," the preacher said. “Until I announced that the Acosta family had recently been blessed with a

newborn baby boy, and I asked the proud father to please stand up."

It has been said, "Looks are so deceptive that just like food packages, people should have their ingredients clearly labeled." Imagine if everyone wore a label displaying all their ingredients. For example, there might be a very handsome man, but if you could read his label and sec that he contained only 10% of the recommended daily allowance of kindness and 200% of the recommended daily allowance of arrogance, how many women would fawn over him? Instead, after reading his ingredients label, they would run for the hills. Or there might be a woman who appeared very beautiful, but by reading her label we could discover that she contains only 5% of the recommended daily allowance of patience and 250% of jealousy. Conversely, a mahatma's ingredients label would read like a multivitamin of positive qualities, with 1000% of the recommended daily allowance of patience, love, kindness, compassion and peace, and 0% of the negative qualities.

Unfortunately, such labels do not exist for human beings, so we have to be discerning when we feel attracted to someone. We have to become introspective and try to understand which type of attraction we are experiencing, and try to cultivate the type of attraction that is long-lasting and beneficial to us. Obviously, this means the attraction to the True Self. When we are attracted to the True Self

through the form of a mahatma, our whole life changes for the better. Amma says, “Even a glance, a word, an action from a mahatma can benefit us.”

If we are attracted to an ordinary human being, we will often become totally dependent on them and lose whatever independence we had. But when our attraction to a true master is properly nurtured, the master leads us from dependence to complete independence, as she slowly guides us to realize our true nature.

Many years back, Amma gave me the job of serving food to the devotees who came to the ashram each day. Amma had requested that whoever was serving food should not cat until everyone else had eaten. After everyone was finished eating, I would clean the floor of the dining hall, and only then would I have my food. For whatever reason, I did not find this job particularly interesting. I used to wonder when Amma would transfer me to another department. Then one day Amma walked into the dining hall and began serving the food herself, going to each devotee and serving the food to them where they were seated. I followed along behind her and served another dish. When the devotees were finished eating, Amma also personally scrubbed the floor of the dining hall, despite my attempts to stop her.

The next day when I was serving, the strong memory of Amma serving the previous day came to my mind, and

I found that my attitude in carrying out the work had been completely transformed. Remembering that Amma had done this job the day before, I was then able to perform the work with so much enthusiasm, sincerity and love. And even though that was many years ago, the memory of that day is so strong in me that I still never miss a chance to serve food to the devotees visiting the ashram.

Another incident from many years ago had a similarly profound impact on one of the *brahmacharis* (monastic disciples). One day while Amma was giving darshan, she suddenly stopped for a moment; her attention seemed to be elsewhere. Then Amma stated unequivocally, "The cow is crying." I was surprised to hear her say this because at that time there were people singing bhajans loudly, and the cowshed was quite far from the darshan hut. Besides, nobody else had heard the cows cries. But Amma immediately stood up, asking the remaining devotees to wait for her return, and walked in the direction of the cowshed.

When she reached there, she found that the cow had not been fed or given a bath that day and was covered in its own dung. Amma called the brahmachari who was entrusted with caring for the cow and asked him why the cow was in such a pitiable condition. The brahmachari explained that he had overslept that morning and because he had not wanted to be late for his meditation, he had skipped his duties in the cowshed.

Amma then asked him, "How would you feel if someone forgot to feed you or if you had to walk around all day covered in din without having a bath? Doing your duty sincerely is also a form of meditation, in fact, attending to the needs of speechless animals, that are not even able to say what they want or need, is no less important than meditation."

Then Amma herself fed and washed the cow. rhe brahmachari tried to intervene, but Amma insisted on doing the work herself. This experience made a strong impression on the young man, who had been pampered as a child and was not used to doing any kind of manual labor. But after seeing Amma care for the cow with so much love and attention, he never failed to discharge his duties in the cowshed.

Before leaving the cowshed that day. Amma also told the brahmachari the following story. Once there was a doctor who was very devoted to the Divine Mother. One day during his meditation the goddess appeared before him. As he suddenly was enjoying the vision, he heard someone crying out at the entrance of his house. Hearing the sound, he immediately got up and ran towards the patient and attended to him. After caring for the patient, he returned to his *puja* (worship) room. He was very surprised to see that the Divine Mother was still there in the room. Filled with remorse for making the Goddess wait, he apologized

profusely for leaving her there. She replied, “You have done the right thing. If you had not gone to attend the needs of that sick person, I would have disappeared immediately. But because you put the happiness of another before your own, I was compelled to wait here for you. God will always follow a person who is selflessly serving others.”

This is the attraction that will finally take us beyond objective reality forever: that of God or the guru toward his devotees. During Amma’s 2006 European Tour, one evening shortly before a Devi Bhava darshan was about to begin, Amma suddenly commented, “My mind keeps being drawn toward Amritapuri. I'm feeling so attracted toward my children in the ashram." I did not give the comment much importance, but later, after the darshan concluded, Amma was able to speak to the ashram residents using a webcam on a laptop computer. There was a big screen set up at the ashram for the ashram residents to see Amma. and on the laptop screen she could also see all their faces as they gathered in front of the camera.

Gazing lovingly at the faces of her children in the ashram, Amma said, “It has been a few weeks since I have seen you. How are all of you? Do you have anything to tell Amma?”

Hearing Amma’s words, in one voice the ashram residents cried out, *‘Ammaaaa! Ammaaaa!"*

Amma repeated inquisitively, “My children, don’t you have anything to tell Amma?"

Again they all cried out with one voice, *"Ammaaaa! Ammaaaa!"*

Watching this scene unfold, I understood why Amma had been so attracted to her children at Amritapuri. The ashram residents’ minds were filled with the thought of Amma alone. They did not even have any desires or problems to share with her—just a desireless, overpowering love. It is not that Amma was being partial toward them; in fact she had no choice but to think of them. Amma says that a river doesn’t have a desire to flow in one direction or another—it simply flows. But when you dig a trench next to the river, the river will naturally flow into that trench. Similarly, when we have such a strong desire for God or guru, the guru has no choice but to reach out to us.

Another incident, which took place during the same tour, shows the strength of Amma’s attraction toward her devotees. Once, after an extremely long darshan in Europe, Amma was making her way to the room in the hall where she would stay during the short break between the morning and evening programs. Devotees lined her path on both sides and Amma was touching their hands and frequently stopping to speak to one person or the other. The devotees in turn used this opportunity to receive one more embrace from Amma. At one point I mentioned to Amma, “These

people have already received darshan today, and they will be able to see you again in just a couple of hours... you could be using this time to get some rest."

Amma replied, "Nothing makes me happier than being with my children. What else do you think I am here for?"

In any relationship, both panics have to be attracted to the other. So let us first cultivate our attraction toward Amma. and then try to become more attractive to her. We do this not by putting on more makeup or by wearing expensive clothes but by cultivating positive qualities like kindness, compassion and a selfless attitude.

Some years back, a young man from Rameswaram (on Tamil Nadu's east coast) came to Amritapuri to see Amma for the first time. He arrived only after she had finished giving darshan for the day, and, as he didn't want to cat before seeing her, he fasted the entire day. The following day, he was able to receive Amma's darshan, and the moment she embraced him, he broke down crying. Amma asked him what was wrong and he explained that in his village, the people were so poor and were suffering so much. He went on to say that he wanted to do something to ease their pain, but did not know what he could do. He said that because of this, he'd lost his appetite and his ability to sleep properly. The young man then sincerely requested Amma to bless the people of his town.

Amma was so moved by his compassionate attitude that she assured him she would do something for his townspeople. Soon after, she committed to build 108 houses for impoverished people in that town, launch free medical camps, build a surgery clinic and help students finance their education. Later, when the houses were complete and the other programs had been initiated, she also visited the town for the first time.

The young man who had come to ask for Amma's help had become very involved in the projects there, and later, after the 2004 Asian tsunami, Amma asked him to go to Sri Lanka and help supervise the ashram's construction of new houses for the tsunami victims. It was difficult, dangerous work—at one point he was even surrounded by gunmen who threatened his life. After working there for some time, he returned to India and got married. But there was still work to do in Sri Lanka, and two weeks after his wedding he asked Amma if he could return to the construction site. Amma said, “Are you sure? After all, you are newly married."

The young man told Amma that knowing that there was so much left to do before the tsunami victims would get their lives back in order, he could not rest easy. Before leaving, the young man asked Amma for her *prasad?* As

prasad -offering or gift from a holy person or temple, oftenin the form of food.

Amma gave it to him, she commented, “Why should you ask for prasad? You yourself are Amma’s prasad."

Though she said it casually, this was in fact a very profound statement. When we offer something to God with our whole heart, it becomes consecrated and is returned back to us as prasad. This young man had offered his life to Amma, and she returned it as a blessing for the world.

One day, a young boy was seated on his mothers lap, gazing up into her eyes. But then a flicker of doubt flashed across his eyes, and his mother, being attuned to her sons heart, immediately noticed. “What is it, my child?”

The boy nervously acknowledged his mothers right hand, which was terribly scarred—one finger was missing and two others were fused together. “Though you are so beautiful, mother, I cannot bear to look at your hand. It is so disgusting—if I glance at it once, I never want to look at it again."

His mother was unfazed. “Before you were born, our neighbors house caught fire," she explained. “They were away at work, but I could hear the cries of their young daughter inside. Without thinking, I rushed into the burning house and somehow managed to escape with the baby. In the process, my right hand caught fire. That is how my hand became like this."

Hearing his mothers words, the boy took her damaged hand in his and kissed it gingerly. “Oh, mother, this is the most beautiful hand in the world."

The passing of our youthful good looks is only a matter of time, and even before that our physical beauty may be marred by injury or disease. Rather than becoming depressed brooding over this inevitability, we can instead cultivate a beautiful mind. When we practice love, compassion, kindness and patience, we develop an inner beauty that never fades away.

CHAPTER 5

The Key to Happiness

I was always giving, so people called me "Mother.

-Amma

"I want to share with you what I have learned from (Amma 's Ashram: Giving. Go on giving... There is no greater message than Amma's giving to all the people of this region, and Kerala, and India, and to the world. "

—Former President of India. Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam

Once, a woman was explaining to her friend the secret of her long, peaceful marriage. "My husband and I take time to go to a restaurant two times a week," she said. "A little candlelight dinner, soft music and a slow walk home."

"Oh!" her friend exclaimed. "That is lovely—but you know, in all these years I've never seen you two out together."

"Well, you wouldn't," the first woman explained. "He goes on Tuesdays and I go on Fridays."

In this way, some people think that the key to happiness lies in avoiding problems. Even in India, considered by many to be the spiritual heart of the world, there is an

ancient philosophy called *Charvaka* declaring that there is no Atma, no God, no *Brahman-** that once the body is dead, it becomes a handful of ash and we cease to exist. Therefore, the Charvakas say, "Make money, eat well and be happy. If you don't have enough money to enjoy life, borrow some and drink ghee? After all, who knows when you are going to die?"

In recent times, scientists have even begun to postulate that happiness is genetic, that we have a built-in happiness thermostat predetermined by our inherited genes. The scientists tell us we can rise above our fixed point of happiness by up to 25 percent by filling our life with a steady diet of simple pleasures, not unlike that offered by the Charvakas. However, there are some obvious flaws with this theory. What about those who cannot afford to fill up their day with creature comforts and could not borrow money even if they wanted to? And even for those who can, the happiness achieved is necessarily limited both in terms of time and scale. The body will grow old and sick, and even before that may suffer injury. If our body is damaged, our capacity to enjoy sensory pleasures is even further reduced. Clearly, then, it is worth examining what the rishis of Sanatana

[4] **The Ultimate Truth beyond any attributes The omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent substratum of the universe.**

[5] **Traditionally. ghee (clarified butter) was a high-priced luxury item used to add taste to dishes. Thus, drinking ghee became synonymous with living a luxurious, pleasure-filled life.**

Dharma—who looked beyond the body, mind and intellect to discover the true source of peace and bliss—have to say about the art and science of happiness.

According to the Indian scriptures, there are actually three levels of happiness: *priya, moda* and *pramoda.* Priya is the type of happiness that comes from the perception of a desired object. When we possess it, the happiness increases; this is called moda. The happiness that ensues when we actually enjoy the object is still more intense; this is called pramoda.

For example, let's say we see someone drinking a caramel macchiato. Thinking of the tasty beverage, we experience a kind of excited happiness—priya. When we order one of our own and it is in our hands, we feel a higher level of happiness—moda. But the highest happiness possible in this case—pramoda—comes when we drink it.

When we contemplate on why the intensity of happiness increases in this way, it is quite revealing. The scriptures say that when we enjoy a desired object, the mental agitation caused by the desire is eliminated. It is this agitation—or the desire itself—which prevents us from experiencing the ever-present bliss of our true nature.

Considered from another angle, we can say that what is taking place is a kind of forgetfulness—for the moment, the desire is forgotten, and our mind becomes still. When the mind is still, it more clearly reflects the bliss of the Atma.

I he same phenomenon is at work to the fullest extent in the exalted state *of samadhi.* In all these states, the blissful feeling comes from losing the awareness of our ego and sense of self as a limited individual. Thoughts, desires, the notions of “I and “mine"—all these are like clouds obscuring the light of the sun: our True Self, the Atma, which is of the nature of infinite bliss. Just as the sun shines most brighdy in a clear blue sky, when our mind is empty of thoughts and desires, only the bliss of our True Self remains. The happiness is not inherent in the external object but comes from within.

Thus we find that our happiness—even what we think of as life’s simple pleasures—is ultimately not related to the objects we so desperately pursue. Rather, it is directly proportionate to how much we forget our limited self in the enjoyment of those objects.

A mahatma like Amma does not need any technique to achieve happiness—it is her very nature—but she sets an example for the rest of us to follow. One of the most striking examples of this phenomenon was Amma’s 2004 visit to the city of Mangalore in Karnataka. At that time, the scale of the crowd was unprecedented—nearly 100,000 people, each expecting to receive Amma’s embrace. Amma arrived at the stage for *satsantf* and bhajans at 7:00 pm, and gave

[6] **Literally; "association with the Truth." The highest form of satung is umadhi. or total absorption in the Absolute. Satsang can also mean being in the presence of a spiritual master, association with other spiritual seekers, reading spiritual books or listening to a discourse on spirituality.**

darshan beginning at 9:30 that evening. She did not move from the spot until after 4:30 in the afternoon the following day—she gave darshan continuously, at a breakneck pace, for more than 19 hours. All those who had the patience to wait received Amma's darshan that day.

But to me, the most remarkable thing of all on that day was not the number of people Amma hugged or the duration of time. It was how she behaved afterwards.

After such a marathon session, one would expect someone to schedule a week s vacation. But in fact, she did not even take a single day oft—in fact, Amma has never taken a day off. As usual, there was another program scheduled for the event next day. From the stage, she got directly into a car and made the eight-hour road trip to Bangalore, the next stop on her tour.

I had gone ahead to Amma's ashram in Bangalore to help with arranging the program arrangements. On the way to Bangalore, some of the other swamis contacted me to let me know that the darshan had gone very late. With that in mind, they requested that I be sure that Amma would not be hindered by crowds as she made her way from the car to the room.

However, because there was a program scheduled for the next day. there were already a few hundred volunteers on the ashram grounds. Shortly before Amma arrived, I did my best to clear the area around Amma's room, ask-

ing the volunteers to stand behind a gate some distance away. I imagined that from there, they would be invisible to Amma.

Thus, when Amma stepped out of the car, there were very few people to meet her—myself and a handful of brahmacharis. We were about to whisk Amma away to her room, which was just a short distance from where she had stepped out of the car, when it became clear that she had her own plans. Turning away from the staircase to her room, Amma walked around the car toward the gate where the devotees were congregated. However, she had not seen anyone yet, so I continued to try to persuade Amma to go straight to her room. Without looking at me, Amma wondered aloud, “Why is there no one else here? Where are the devotees?"

By then, the devotees had caught sight of Amma and begun to call out to her. With that, the jig was up—like water gushing out from the dam. they began to slip around, under, over and through the gate and rushed toward Amma.

She did not shy away. Only after giving prasad to each and every person there did Amma finally agree to go to her room.

Let us stop and ask ourselves: is this what we would have done? Imagine for a moment, that we had somehow mustered the strength to embrace so many tens of thousands of people—leaving aside the fact that no one other than

Amma has ever done so in recorded history. Wouldn't we then take the next available opportunity to stretch out for as long as possible?

We can all recall some time when we have pushed ourselves to our physical limits. At the time, even while working, we are thinking something like, "After this is all over. I'm going to sleep for a week." In other words, even while serving others, we keep ourselves motivated with the promise of a future pleasure for ourselves. So it cannot be called purely selfless. Amma, however, is totally different. Recendy responding to a journalist who asked, "You have done so much in both the spiritual and humanitarian fields. How do you fed about your accomplishments?"

"I always think that I am not doing enough for my children," Amma shrugged. "That's all I think."

Truly humble people don't think less of themselves—they just think about themselves less.

Once, a philosophy professor stood before his class with some unusual items laid out on his desk. When the class began, he wordlessly picked up a large empty jar and proceeded to fill it with rocks. When the rocks had reached the jar's rim, the professor asked the students if the jar was full. They agreed that it was.

The professor then picked up a box of smaller pebbles and poured them into the jar. The pebbles, of course, rolled

into the open areas between the rocks. He then asked the students again if the jar was full.

They agreed that it was.

I he professor picked up a box of sand and poured it, too, into the jar. The sand filtered down into the cracks between the pebbles and the larger rocks.

“Now," said the professor, “Is the jar full?"

This time the students kept quiet, certain only that the professor had something more in store for them. And so he did; from behind his desk he produced a bottle of water, and poured it into the seemingly full jar.

Like this, we always think at first glance that we have done enough. Even if we do one or two good deeds in a day, we feel justified in taking the rest of the day off, or we say that we have no more time or energy to give. But Amma is able to look at the seemingly full jar and find a little more space; in her own seemingly full schedule, she can always find time for one more act of compassion. In an ashram filled to overflowing, she can always find room for one more darling child. Even before completing one massive charitable project, she initiates two more. In Gujarat after the 2001 earthquake, no organization was willing to adopt the reconstruction and rehabilitation of the larger villages. Even though Amma had already initiated her nationwide housing project and the Ashram had no unallocated funds

to speak of, she agreed to take care of three of the largest villages, ultimately constructing more than 1,200 homes. Similarly, after the 2004 Asian tsunami, Amma immediately offered to reconstruct all the houses in Kerala destroyed by the disaster. And in 2007, when every effort had failed to turn the tide against farmer suicides in Maharashtra, Kerala and other states, Amma came forward with a massive, multi-faceted relief package.

Amma's only wish is to see her children happy. But she knows very well the difference between temporary and permanent happiness, and that the key to attaining the latter is in identifying oneself with the whole, not in seeking ones own well-being alone.

One of the brahmacharis who represents Amma's organization abroad narrates a beautiful story about the power of selfless love. There is a devotee of Amma's who has severe cerebral palsy, and thus spends his days in a wheelchair. Curiously enough, however, he is always smiling. But what the brahmachari found even more surprising was that, in advance of Amma's visit to his country, he started coming for all the meetings for the program volunteers, though he is unable to do any physical work or even speak intelligibly.

During Amma's visit, he came to her with a question. As the brahmachari had always felt sorry for him, he was sure that it would be some kind of prayer for a healing or something else about his physical condition. When the

young man uttered his question, the brahmachari could not even understand what he was trying to say. But w hen his attendant repeated it comprehensibly, the brahmachari was deeply touched. His question to Amma was:

'Dear Amma, this country is one of the most materially affluent in the world, but spiritually I feel it is one of the most impoverished. I love my country, so what can I do to elevate my country spiritually, and increase its spiritual wealth?"

Amma gazed deep into the young man's eyes with a loving expression like that of a proud mother when her son graduates at the top of his class. Her eyes moist, she replied, "Son, this shows your own spiritual wealth. With people like you in this country there's definitely hope for the future, so don't worry. Your innocent heart and the example you are setting is enough to inspire others in the proper direction."

After the devotee had left. Amma turned to the brahmachari and said, "Now do you understand why he is always happy? He could have asked Amma for his ow'n physical healing, but because of his selfless love, he prayed for the spiritual healing of his whole country, instead. That selfless love is the key to happiness."

Once, a student was going for a walk with his professor. Along the way. they saw' a pair of old shoes lying by the wayside. Looking into the nearby paddy field, they saw a

poor manual laborer who must have taken off his shoes to wade into the marsh. It was late in the day. and judging by his bent and worn appearance, he had probably been at the work for a long time.

Turning to his professor with a mischievous gleam in his eyes, the student proposed. “Why don’t we play a trick on him—let’s hide his shoes, and then hide behind that stand of tall grasses. I can’t wait to see the look on his face when he can’t find them."

“I don’t think so. my boy." the professor admonished him. “After all, we should never amuse ourselves at the ex- pense of the poor. But you are rich and may give yourself much greater pleasure by means of this poor man. Put a $100 bill in each shoe, and then we can hide and watch how this discovery affects him."

Thinking that he had won the better part of a com- promise. the student agreed and followed the professors instructions.

The laborer soon finished his work and trudged out of the paddy field to the road where he had left his shoes.

He began to slip on his right shoe, but feeling something unfamiliar, suddenly stooped down to fish out the foreign object. \XT»cn he saw what it was, astonishment and wonder danced acros his face. He gazed upon the bill, held it up to the light, turned it over, and turned it over once again.

Looking around, there was not a person to he seen in any direction. Finally, shrugging, he put the bill into his pocket and proceeded to put on the other shoe. Finding the second $ 100 bill, his surprised was doubled.

Overcome with feeling, he fell to his knees, looked up to heaven and uttered a loud, fervent thanksgiving. He spoke of his sick and helpless wife, and his children who had not had a square meal in a week. And he thanked God for the miracle of the money in his shoes.

After the laborer went on his way, the professor and student emerged from their hiding place. The student stood as though rooted to the ground, his eyes wet with tears. “Now,” said the professor, “are you not much happier than if you had played your intended trick?"

The youth replied, “You have taught me a lesson I will never forget. It is truly more blessed to give than to receive."

“Happiness is like perfume," the professor observed. “We cant pour it on someone else without getting a few drops on ourselves.”

Recently, I read about a story about three brothers who went skydiving together. While they were freefalling, their parachutes got entangled and it seemed that all three were doomed. But one of them had an idea. In order to save the other two, he removed his own chute and plummeted

down to his end, allowing the other two brothers to survive. His example of sacrifice was so astonishing that the whole world took notice as the incident was replayed in international news media.

In fact, Amma is quietly sacrificing herself every day. Not for the sake of two people, but for millions of people across the globe, even for total strangers whom she has never met before. And what does she take in return? The more one witnesses Aromas life, the more one can clearly see how little she rests, eats or sleeps. This is no secret. The real secret, which only Amma knows, is how she has sustained her body over the past 36 years, despite the most grueling life of sacrifice.

In the *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life,* the Buddhist author Shantidcva says,

"If I give this, what shall I have left to enjoy?"
Such selfish thinking is the way of the demons:
"If I enjoy this, what shall I have lefi to give?"
Such selfless thinking is a quality of the gods.

Amma says, "Only when we look at others with compassion can it be said that we are looking within. The divine seed of spirituality will sprout only when it is watered with compassion."

There is a story from the life of the great sage Ramanuja that illustrates this point. Early in his spiritual life.

before Ramanuja was initiated into a mantra by his guru Thirukottiyur Nambi, he was rebuffed 17 times. Each time he had to travel—on foot—a distance of more than 100 miles. Finally Nambi agreed to initiate him, but only under certain conditions. Nambi told Ramanuja that the mantra would take anyone who chanted it to the heavenly realm of Lord Vishnu. However, if Ramanuja shared it with anyone else, he himself would go to hell.

Ramanuja agreed to the terms and received the mantra initiation. But on that very same journey, even before Ramanuja he had reached home, he called all the people of his village to assemble before the village temple. When the}' were all gathered together, Ramanuja stood on the temple tower and shouted out the sacred mantra at the top of his voice. He announced that he had received this mantra from the peerless guru Thirukottiyur Nambi with a guarantee of reaching the abode of Vishnu, and urged them all to chant the mantra with all earnestness.

Nambi was very angry when he heard the news. He rushed to Ramanuja and demanded to know why he had shared the mantra. Ramanuja replied that if his going to hell meant thousands would go to heaven, it was but a small sacrifice on his part, one he was glad to make. This profoundly humane reply moved Nambi so deeply that he told his disciple, “Ramanuja, in this act of compassion you have surpassed even me."

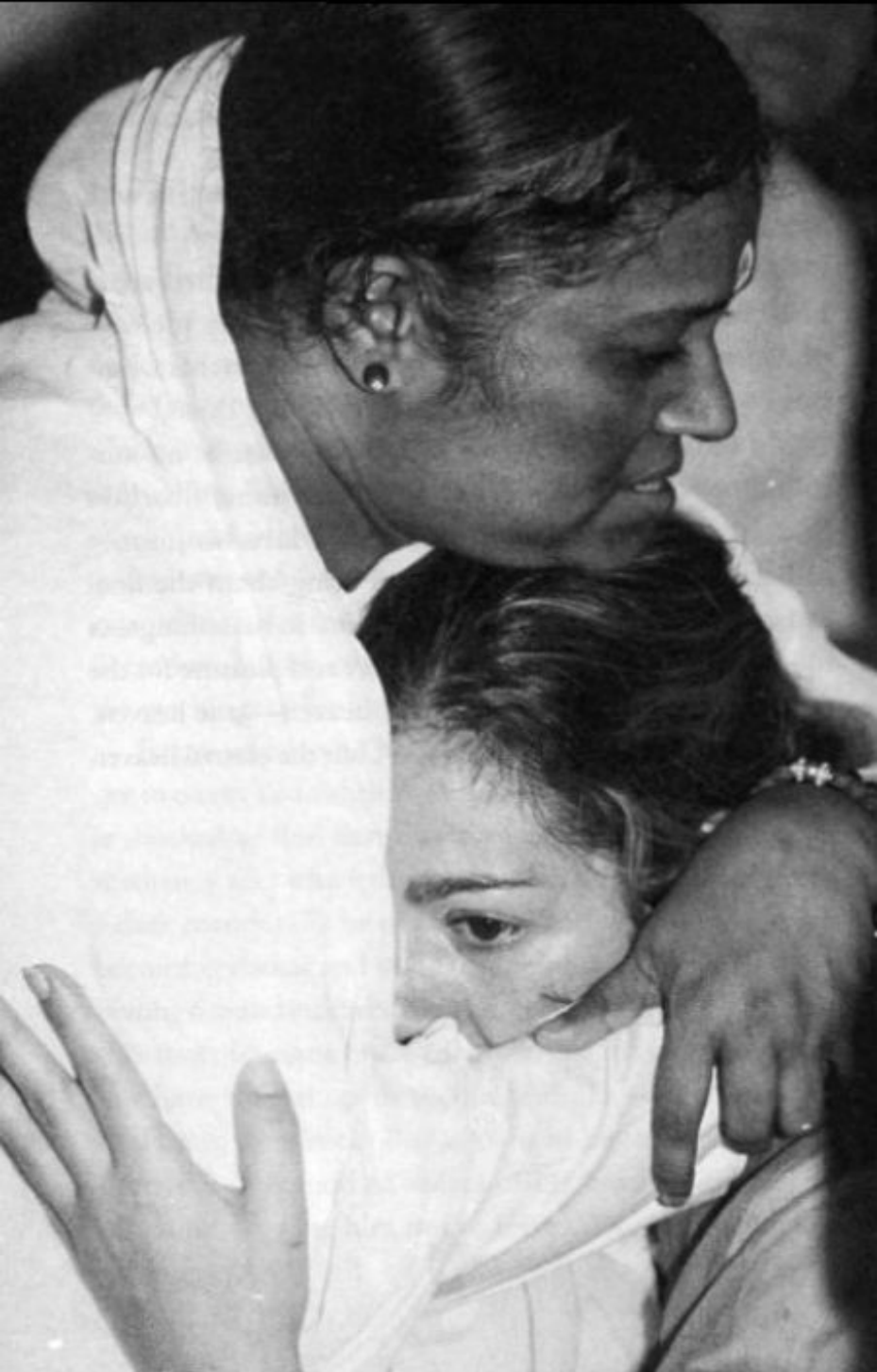
There is a story in the epic *Mahabharata* that illustrates the real power of sacrifice. Toward the end of the epic, long after the Mahabharata War was over and after they had ruled the country for more than three decades, the Pandavas decide to give up all worldly attachments and undertake their final journey to the holy lands of the Himalayas. It is a long and arduous trek, and on their way, one by one, they start dying. Finally, only the eldest, Yudhishthira, remains alive. Yudhishthira has spent his entire life trying to be the embodiment *of dharma* (righteousness). He has struggled to expand his heart and purify his mind. He has not attained liberation, but his whole life has been in accordance with the teachings of his guru.

Eventually, Io and behold, a chariot descends from the sky to escon Yudhishthira to heaven. But upon arriving, he is shocked to find that his brothers are not there. He immediately asks where they are, and in response is led down a dark corridor. As he walks along, the environment starts becoming darker and more frightening. He passes lakes of boiling fire and vultures dining on piles of corpses. Thinking this must be some cruel trick—surely his brothers could not have wound up in such a foul place—Yudhishthira decides to turn back. But as soon as he turns around, he hears the disembodied voices of his brothers calling out his name, begging him not to leave. “Don’t go!” they say.

“Your presence here is like a cool breeze, providing us with at least some relief from this torturous existence."

At this point, Yudhishthira says, “If my brothers are in hell, then I am not interested in heaven. If my presence provides even the slightest amount of comfort to them, how can I consider leaving? I refuse to go without them.”

As soon as Yudhishthira utters these words, his surroundings change completely—he finds himself back in heaven, surrounded by his brothers. In fact, his journey to hell had been a drama set up to bring about the final expansion of Yudhishthira’s compassion. In his willingness to renounce his own personal comfort and pleasure for the sake of others, Yudhishthira found heaven—true heaven. Not a city of gold high in the clouds, but the eternal heaven of a compassionate heart.



CHAPTER 6

From Leaning to Learning

"For a long time it had seemed to me that life was about to begin—real life. But there was always some obstacle in the way, something to begotten through first, some unfinished business, time still to be served, a debt to be paid Then life would begin. At last it dawned on me that these obstacles were my life."

—Alfred D'Souza

Once, a wise man saw someone sitting dispiritedly at the side of the road. The wise man stopped and asked the despondent fellow what was troubling him.

"There is nothing of interest in life," sighed the man on the ground. "I have sufficient capital so I don't have to work, and I have been traveling far and wide in order to seek something more entertaining than the life I have at home. But alas—so far I haven't found it."

The wise man listened patiently to the other man's woes. When he was finished, without warning the wise man suddenly stooped, snatched the traveler's knapsack and made off down the road, running like a rabbit. Though the other man leapt up and gave chase, the wise man knew the area well and was easily able to lose him. Making use

of several shortcuts, the wise man was soon back on the road, well ahead of the man he had just robbed. He placed the knapsack by the side of the road and waited for the distressed traveler to show up.

Soon the miserable man appeared, gasping for breath and looking all the more despondent for his loss. But the moment he saw his property laying by the side of the road, he ran towards it, shouting with joy.

“That’s one way of producing happiness," the wise man commented dryly.

Everyone wants to maximize their happiness and minimize their sorrows. Recent research by Harvard psychologist Daniel Gilbert indicates that everything we think, say and do is an effort to increase our degree of happiness, either now or at some point in the future. That may seem obvious enough, but his research also shows that people are not very good at predicting how certain events will make them feel. Goals are achieved or missed, possessions are won or lost, relationships sweeten or sour, and in almost all cases, we don’t feel as happy—or as sad—as we had thought we would. From a spiritual standpoint, we know that this is because happiness is not found outside but within, and that any pleasure we enjoy in the world is just a pale reflection of the inherent happiness of our True Self.

What about sorrow? If we don’t feel as sad as we had thought we would—if the entire world does not come

crashing down when we meet with some misfortune, if life goes on—then maybe sorrow is not something to be so instinctively and fiercely avoided and defended against. After all, have we ever imagined what a life without any trials or tribulations would really be like on a day-to-day basis, if our every desire was instantly fulfilled? Without any challenges or difficulties in life, our mind becomes weak, our talents remain dormant and our capabilities rust away. As spiritual aspirants, rather than shying away from difficulty, we can do our best to welcome challenges as opportunities to strengthen our mental capacities, develop positive qualities and surrender to God.

Actually, for most people, suffering is just part and parcel of life on earth. We just have to ask the millions who live in abject poverty and war-torn areas—they will tell us how full of suffering life is. We just have to ask Amma, who has heard the woes of millions of people around the world coming to her for consolation, guidance and grace.

Many people yearn for a golden age when everyone on earth is equally prosperous. They ask, "Why must human beings suffer?"

There is a beautiful story that gives at least part of the answer to this question. Once a prince asked his father, the king, “Why is there so much disparity in your kingdom.' You have enough wealth in rhe palace treasury to make everyone a rich man. Why don’t you do it? With just a

stroke of your pen, you could wipe out suffering from this entire land."

I'he king, having a soft spot for his son, agreed to his wish, though he knew the result might be other than what his son had in mind. He ordered his treasurer to open the palace coffers and send the message far and wide that all the king's subjects could come and take whatever they wished. With that, the riches of the king began to flow like a river out of the palace, and all the king's subjects lived in luxury and never knew what it was to want.

Some time later, the roof of the palace began to leak badly, it was during the monsoon season, and even the prince's bedroom was partially submerged in water. The prince called for his servants to help him dry out his room, but he was told the servants were all rich men now and had given up their jobs and gone home for good. Every morning the prince had to bail water out of his room, using a bucket to dump the water out the window. When he asked for laborers to come and fix the palace roof, he was told that there were no laborers left in the kingdom. In the absence of masons, carpenters and artisans, not only the palace but all the buildings in the kingdom were falling into disrepair, and no one had bothered to collect the garbage or sweep the streets in weeks. The subjects began to complain to the prince whenever he set foot out of the palace. Everyone had plenty of money, but the money had become worthless; no

one needed to earn a living, so no one had any inclination to work. Instead of creating heaven on earth, the prince had plunged the entire kingdom into destitution. Finally, the prince was forced to beg the king to rescind his order. The king again obeyed the prince's wish. On order from the king, the subjects returned the riches and once more began to work. In this way, the kingdoms harmony and prosperity were restored.

It is not that we are asked to invite sorrow, but rather to accept it as a natural and unavoidable pan of life. After all, even if we do not invite it, it will come to us. Thus it is better to be prepared and to be able to respond in a positive and constructive way.

A student fell asleep with his head on the desk during a class period. As punishment, the teacher asked the student to run the circumference of the school's playground three times. The student obediently went round the playground thrice and returned to the classroom. The student returned looking not penitent but refreshed and relaxed. Infuriated, the teacher ordered the student to do the same thing before class for the following two days. The next two days he could be seen arriving early to school and jogging as per the teacher's instructions. But on the fourth day, the teacher saw that the student was still running before class. When the student entered the class, she told him, "You've

been punished enough. I only asked you to do this for three days. You don't have to continue."

The student replied brightly, "You know, after that first run, I felt so lively, and I was able to follow the class much better than before. Now, I don't want to give it up!"

Like this, living in the world can be either a *learning* process or a *leaning* process. Either we learn from all the experiences life brings us, or we lean on people and objects for support. The only difference is the R. That R is the Reflection, Remembrance of God and Renunciation we practice in our daily life.

A journalist asked Amma, "Was there any particular event that influenced you in your childhood?" Amma replied, "It is the tears and suffering and pain of others that influenced me. I would console them and show them love."

In fact, Amma herself was never overcome by sorrow. Later in that same interview, the journalist asked Amma to recall a blissful moment from her childhood, and reminded Amma of the days when she would walk alone along the beach singing devotional songs to God. But Amma replied, "I didn't remember God or chant his names in order to gain happiness. When I would walk along the beach, the waves would remind me of the drone of a *tambura,* and 1 would sing songs in tune with it. I did that, but it was not to gain any happiness, for I was always happy. The feelings

I would express in the songs were reflections of the sorrow and longing I felt in the people of the world."

Though Amma could clearly perceive the oneness pervading all of creation, she was so moved by the suffering of those who could not that she reached out to comfort them and console them. Amma explains, "When I saw their suffering, I would forget myself and my own needs. I used to wipe their tears and console them. I would have them lie in my lap or lay their head on my shoulder. Others, watching me do like this, would then want me to do the same for them. Slowly, a line would form. That is how this way of darshan began. People would come and cry out. And in sharing their sorrow, I would identify myself with them. If our right hand is hurting, our left hand will automatically caress and care for it—because we see both the hands as 'mine.' Likewise I did not see these people as different from me."

We can see from Amma's example that it is not only possible to be loving and peaceful amidst personal hardship, but it is often those very hardships that help us to mature, expand and grow. In Sanskrit, *tapam* can mean either heat or sorrow. This indicates that sorrow provides the heat needed for our growth, just like plants need the heat of the sun to prosper.

This was certainly true for one woman in Turkey after the massive earthquake there. She was quoted in the news-

paper as saying, “May God spare my worst enemies from such a fate." The traumatic experience itself helped in the expansion of her heart. Suddenly she found herself praying for those whom she had considered enemies. There is a similar story about one of Amma’s brahmacharis who went to the earthquake-devastated area in Gujarat to rebuild the villages there but became very sick during his stay. Some of us visited him at the hospital during his recovery period. When we walked in the room, we expected him to talk about his pain or to ask for something other than hospital food to eat. But the first thing he said was, “Did anyone else come down with the same thing?”

We told him not to worry about others but just to focus on his own recovery. Shaking his head, the brahmachari explained, “This sickness is so unbearable; nobody should have to suffer through it.”

Amma says that God does not punish us, but there are some universal laws that function and govern creation. As the saying goes, “You cannot break the Law, you can only break yourself against the Law." Every experience that life brings is meant to guide us to the true source of happiness within. It is up to us whether we avail ourselves of these opportunities or not. It is for our own good if we try to derive the maximum spiritual growth we can from every form of suffering in our life.

We can see from Aminas example that accepting all situations without closing our hearts or becoming afraid is the hallmark of true spirituality. Amma says, “Let us try to confront life’s problems courageously by thinking, 'Nothing can defeat or enslave me. I am God’s child.’ Do not try to run away from problems in your life; that will only give them more strength to overcome you. A truly spiritual person is neither afraid of losses nor death."

Once, two men went out for a drink. One of the men kept drinking on and on. Finally his friend asked him, “Hey, why are you drinking so much?"

He replied. “I’m trying to drown my sorrows.”

“Is it working?" his friend asked.

“No,” the second man said with a long face. “Unfortunately, my problems have learned to swim."

Challenges in life force us to choose between what is good and what is merely pleasant; what pleases our senses is of little help to us in hard times. Of course, we may not all be able to muster the courage it takes a firefighter to rush into a burning building or the inner strength it takes a soldier to fight on the battlefield. But all of us can learn from Amma the courage to face the challenges life brings us, even though it may at times feel like a fiery inferno. All of us can learn from Amma the strength we need to face our inner enemies of fear, anger, jealous}’ and other negative qualities.

Amma says that circumstances are one of the best ways by which we can test our spiritual progress, as they bring out what lies beneath the surface. In one moment, all our fears and weaknesses can be revealed if only the circumstances are right—so also our strengths. In Ammas presence, there are ample opportunities for us to discover our short-temper, impatience, and other negative qualities.

Once a Western visitor to the ashram came to one of the brahmacharis and related some problems he was having. He said, “Just a little while ago I was having such a great meditation with Amma in the temple. Suddenly this tall guy with big hair comes and sits down right in front of me. He was practically on my lap, and I couldn't even see Amma at all anymore. Suddenly the focus of my meditation shifted. All I could think about was what it would be like to bear that guy up and drag him out of the temple by that hair of his."

When hardship comes in life, it is helpful to remember that God is not closing his eyes to our misery but opening our eyes to the Truth. Actually, it is our ignorance and ego that are coming to an end as a result of the maturity we acquire from these lessons in life. Perhaps it is with this in mind that Amma says, “In the end, everyone will turn inward.”

Once, a girl was telling her mother how everything was going wrong in her life—she was failing in algebra, her

boyfriend had broken up with her and her best friend was moving away. As she listened, her mother was in the process of baking a cake. Suddenly she stopped and asked her daughter if she would like a snack. The daughter replied, “Of course—I can never resist your cake."

“Here, have some cooking oil," her mother offered.

“Yuck,” the girl protested.

“How about a couple of raw eggs?"

“Gross, Mom!"

“Would you like some flour then? Or maybe baking soda?"

“Mom, those are all disgusting!"

The girl’s mother replied, “Exactly—all those things seem bad all by themselves. But when they are put together in the right way, they make a delicious cake."

Likewise, we often wonder, “What did I do to deserve this?” or "Why did God have to do this to me?" Of course, in the final analysis whatever befalls us is a result of our own past actions, in this life or a previous one. But it is also true that all beings are moving toward ultimate liberation and the difficult situations and challenging circumstances we face are opportunities to learn and grow. Too often, however, we miss the forest for the trees, failing to sec the greater good behind the events and circumstances of our life.

Amma describes the attitude a spiritual seeker should have in facing his karma. She says, “A seeker is not worried

whether fortune or misfortune befalls him. He knows that his karma is like an arrow already released from the bow. Nothing can stop it. The arrow might hurt, injure or even kill him, but for him it doesn't matter. He will not want to run away from his karma because he knows that it is a process of purification that is cleansing the stains created by him in the past, in some previous life. And above all, the true seeker will always have the protection and grace of the guru."

We can sec a trapeze artist leaping across great distances from one trapeze to another, hanging by another's ankles, somersaulting through the air at great heights, and performing other amazing feats—ail with a beaming smile on his face. We may say the trapeze artist does all this for money, or for fame, or because he simply loves the feeling. But what allows him to do it with so much confidence and grace, without being paralyzed by fear, is the unshakeable knowledge that he cannot fall to the earth—there is a net between him and the ground. Likewise, when we know we are safe in Amma's arms—that she will never abandon us, even in death—we have nothing to fear, and we cannot be defeated by anything life brings us.

Amma says that our "refuge" is that in which our mind is constantly resting. It may be positive, negative, inside, or outside. It is worth remembering that taking refuge in

anything other than God or the guru will ultimately only disappoint us and result in suffering.

There is a verse in the *Srimad Bhagavatam:*

Take up your abode with the holiest saints:
Those sages whose lives are devoted to God,
And learn by their conduct to live as you must
To see only One in this vast universe.

A few years ago, Amma was playing with a devotee's baby in their swimming pool. The baby became fascinated by the stream of water flowing from one of the jets on the side of the pool. Amma occasionally covered up the flow of water so it stopped completely, and then the baby became confused. But the baby pushed Amma's hand away again and again, so that the water would continue to flow. Gradually, Amma moved her hand farther and farther up the stream of water until she reached the actual spout, and the baby could see where the water was really coming from. In this way, she succeeded in shifting the baby's attention from the stream of water to the source from which it was flowing.

Likewise, Amma's way of weaning us from our dependence on the world—and helping us to finally take refuge in God alone—is the very picture of patience, persistence and perseverance. Just as the baby was initially so preoccupied with the flow of water, we are enchanted by the

seeming reality of the changing world around us, which is really just a projection of the mind. And just as Amma was intermittently interrupting the flow of water, God occasionally deprives us of the objects that we crave, creating confusion and suffering in our lives. And just as when she did so, the baby would push Amma's hand away, so we too resist Amma's tireless efforts to teach us the real nature of the world, not understanding that it is out of compassion that she is trying to save us from our delusion. And so it is the suffering in life that really helps us to redirect our attention from the objects of the world to the inner source of all the happiness we experience.

Recently, when a television journalist asked Amma, "When you think back to your humble beginnings, don't you wonder at how big your organization and following have become in such a short time?"

Amma replied, "I am not amazed, because it is from small things that big things come. So I don't find it a wonder. Then she added, "If everyone on earth were happy, *that* would be a wonder."

CHAPTER 7

You Are Carrying a Diamond: Spirituality is Real Wealth

"To live a pure, unselfish life, one must count nothing as one's own in the midst of abundance. "

-Buddha

Recently I read a story about a man who won $ 100 million in a lottery. When he received the money, he knew his life would change overnight. What he didn't know is that the changes would not necessarily be for the better.

Prior to winning the lottery, he had been a happily married, reasonably successful businessman with teenage grandchildren. After winning the high-profile lottery, his life fell apart: his home and vehicles were robbed repeatedly. He fell into bad company who, in his own words, convinced him to do things he never would have done before. Finally, he was arrested for drunk driving and lost his driver's license, his wife left him and his teenage granddaughter died of a drug overdose. The man now says he would gladly return the money if he could just have his old life back

In fact, the more immersed we become in worldly life, the more necessary spirituality becomes. Amma says, in

truth, there is no way to differentiate between spirituality and worldly life; spirituality is nothing more or less than the science of a life well lived. It is the users manual for the human body, mind and intellect.

Life is far more subtle and complex than we imagine. It takes a special inner skill to make proper use of all that comes to us, to truly live happily. Without properly understanding how to live and how to use the objects of the world, of what use are they to us? How many so-called "successful" people slave away endlessly to buy a luxury car, only to get into an accident driving drunk? We may pursue material wealth and comfort, but it takes a spiritual master like Amma to teach us the subtle inner understanding of how to properly use all of that wealth and comfort. It is our failure to understand the nature of the world—and the emotional strength we need to put our understanding into practice—that keeps lasting peace and happiness out of our reach.

We cannot seek happiness as though we were living in a vacuum, totally independent from the rest of society and the world. Such an attitude ignores the reality of life, the laws of nature and the universe—even the simple facts of science.

Recently I read a story that illustrates this point. The average cost of rehabilitating a seal after a particular oil spill was $80,000. At a special ceremony, two such animals were

released back inro the wild amid cheers and applause from onlookers. A minute later, they were both eaten by killer whales. Everyone was horrified and disappointed, thinking that all their efforts had been in vain. But isn't our interest in preserving the whole ecosystem? And isn't the killer whale part of the ecosystem, too? As the net result served some good for the environment, nobody can say that it was a bad thing, but it certainly wasn't what everyone wanted or expected. So the}' were heartbroken.

Even though the efforts of those involved in this project are certainly laudable, we can see that because of their desire to see the seals prosper, the onlookers had forgotten the reality of life in the wild and thereby set themselves up for disappointment. Like this, even when we do something for a good cause, we often find that we are unconsciously creating a good deal of attachment to the outcome. When things don't unfold according to our expectations, we can lose our enthusiasm to persevere in our efforts to help others and effect a positive change in the world. In the end, it is not the overall good, but usually our own expectations and desires that determine our reaction to situations.

There is a story from the early life of the great saint Tulsidas that shows how we can become blinded by desire and attachment. One day, Tulsidas was away from the home when his wife received an urgent message from her parents, summoning her to their house in a village on the

other side of the Ganges. When Tulsidas returned home to find his wife gone, he became resdess. He wanted to be with her immediately and decided to go and see her at once. It was raining heavily and the Ganges was swollen. Though he could neither sw im nor find a boat, he was undeterred. Seeing a corpse floating down the river, he caught hold of it without hesitation and used it to cross the river. By the time he reached his wife's parents' house, it was very late and the house was locked. Unwilling to wait till first light, he stealthily scaled the wall and climbed up to the roof. From there, he caught hold of what he took to be a rope and tried to swing down through her window'. However, the rope turned out to be a snake, which slithered away as soon as he caught hold of it. Consequently Tulsidas fell into a heap on the floor of his wife's room. His shirt was torn, he was drenched, and his body was covered with the stench of the corpse. Not recognizing him, his wife cried out, "Thief!*

Tulsidas tried to console her, saying, "I am not just any thief but the thief of your heart."

His wife was unimpressed. "Are you this attached to a woman that you cannot bear to leave her even for a night? If you had even half this attachment to Lord Rama, you would have reached him long ago."

Hearing these words, Tulsidas was completely transformed. He devoted the rest of his life to the contemplation

of Lord Rama, and even composed his own version of the *Ramayana,* the *Ram Charit Manas,* which is widely read even to this day.

Just as Tulsidas was blinded by his desire, we too often lose sight of the big picture in pursuit of instant gratification. But when we begin to understand the limitations of desire, we will naturally begin to look within.

Half our life is spent worrying, as we try to find something to do with the time we have rushed through life trying to save. In the end we think, “What a wonderful life I’ve had! I only wish I’d realized it sooner." This is not to say that the essence of spirituality is inactivity; if it were so, all the inanimate trees and rocks would be the greatest sages in the world. Rather, what is needed is action without attachment to the results of the action. This is what we see in Amma. It is action with mental calmness, with an equipoised mind.

In the *Bhagavad Gita,* Sri Krishna tells Arjuna,

darena hyataram karma
buddhtyogdd-dhanamjaya buddhau saranam
anviccha krpanah phalahetavah

Motivated action is, O Dhananjaya, far inferior to that performed with equanimity of mind;Take refuge in the evenness of the mind; wretched are the result-seekers.

(2.49)

Less passion does not mean we have less energy overall. Rather it means less of our energy is exhausted on emotions, and we have more energy left over to serve others. This, then, is actually the best and truest technique of resource management: the allocation of our limited human energy in the most efficient way for the sake of the world. A person who is always at the mercy of his emotions will never be able to get much done. An important part of management in any field is the reduction of waste and increase of efficiency. An untamed mind wastes time and energy by overreacting to situations, brooding over the past and worrying about the future. Such a mind also is inefficient, due to its inability to perceive the essential principles at work in any situation. The real achievers in the world have had equipoise and flexibility of mind, forgiveness, patience and other such qualities.

If we observe Amma closely, we can see that she never wastes any time or energy. Even in the midst of giving darshan, she will handle 100 other things: interviews with journalists, a long list of questions regarding the management of her many charitable institutions, giving personal attention to devotees and disciples who need guidance, pointing out ways the assembled crowd can be made more comfortable and giving mantras and spiritual names.

Of course, at the physical level, different people are doing things that, at first glance, may appear similar to what

Amma is doing. But let us take a closer look. For example, there may be some people who like to give hugs. They may even be able to give a few more hugs than the average person. But do they have the patience to hug thousands of people at a stretch, without food or sleep, every day for so many years? Or, like Amma, some CEOs run multiple institutions at the same time, but can they also set a perfect example of renunciation and sacrifice as Amma does? Some people have a lot of knowledge about the external world, but can they also know and understand the hearts and minds of other human beings?

Even one who is just sitting near Amma listening to all the problems she is presented with will soon feel exhausted—without even being the one who has to provide the solutions. Amma also gives the opportunity for devotees to spend more time near her by performing a given task, such as placing the prasad into her hand for her to give to the devotees. But Amma is often giving darshan at such a fast pace, and there are so many distractions unfolding around her, that even this one simple task proves too much for most people—even while Amma is engaged in a dozen tasks simultaneously and executing each one with grace and perfection.

And we should not forget that Amma is not only embracing people for such marathon periods, though that is a miracle enough in itself. Amma also *talks* to each person

who comes for darshan. She may be consoling them, or answering their questions, or advising them, or congratulating them on a job well done. In this way Amma is talking continuously for 12 hours or more each day. Furthermore, she also sings bhajans every day. Most of us begin to lose our voice if we have to talk all day for just one or two days at a stretch. And sometimes Amma's voice does grow hoarse, but then the next moment, as if by the very force of her will, she can speak or sing with full strength of an orator or a trained singer—though typically, such people give their voice complete rest on the day of their performance, drinking herbal teas and nursing throat lozenges.

In spite of engaging in all this activity, Amma never shows any sign of stress or tension. Normally, a person doing even a small portion *of* Amma's tasks would not only be full of stress, but would also create stress for others. Yet Amma does not suffer any ill effects from engaging in so much action—no tension, stress, burn-out or boredom. And not only is Amma stress-free, but she is also able to free others from stress. I have spoken with many devotee psychiatrists and psychotherapists who say that Amma is the ultimate "stress buster."

The secret behind Amma's ability to express all these divine qualities is *Atma jnana,* or the knowledge of the True Self. It is said that Atma jnana is the knowledge "by knowing which, all else is known." If we know how to har-

ness the energy contained in a nucleus, we can apply that energy in any field. In the same way, Amma's Self-knowledge pervades her every thought. When we watch Amma, we can see this interesting paradox. She perceives both the whole and each and every part at the same time. Looking at the minute level, she will say, "Only if you have love even for a tiny ant can Amma consider that you really love her " The next moment, she will be giving advice about the management of her many vast institutions, such as AIMS, Amma's 1,300-bed hospital, or her Amrita Vidyalayam school system, with 53 schools throughout India.

A Self-realized sou) like Amma truly understands the words of the scriptures: "The microcosm and the macrocosm areone and the same." As mahatmas have realized their oneness with the all-pervasive Self, they can sec both the whole in the individual and the individual in the w hole. Amma also says the entire universe is contained within each and every one of us. Here, she is referring to the fact that the *jivatma* (individual soul) and *Paramatma* (Supreme Being) are one and the same. When the jivatma's ignorance is removed, he realizes he is none other than the Paramatma, like a wave realizing it is in fact one with the ocean.

If we want to become more like Amma, there is a logical progression we must follow. If a scientist wants to understand how to harness the infinite energy contained in the nucleus, he begins by studying the nature of an atom, which

both contains and conceals the nuclear energy. Similarly, in order to gain Atma jnana, we must first understand the nature of our own mind, which can both conceal and reveal our own infinite nature.

Once, a king was stepping out of his palace for his morning walk when a beggar crossed his path and obstructed his way. The king did not brush him aside but instead asked the beggar what he wanted.

I'he answer was not exactly what he was expecting. The beggar began to laugh uproariously. Finally, catching his breath, he explained what was so funny. “You are asking me as though you can fulfill my desire!”

Offended, the king exclaimed, “Of course I can fulfill your desire; just tell me what it is.”

“Think twice before you promise anything,” the beggar responded.

The king brushed the beggars warning aside, insisting, “I will fulfill anything you ask. I am the lord of all that you see; what can you possibly desire that I can not give to you?”

“In fact, mine is but a very simple desire,” the beggar began. “Can you please fill my begging bowl with something? It can be anything you choose."

“Of course,” the king said, and calling one of his attendants, he instructed, “Bring enough gold coins to fill this mans begging bowl many times over." The attendant

went inside the palace and returned with a huge sack of gold. He then upturned the sack and poured until the beggars bowl should have overflowed. However, a funny thing happened: as soon as the coins entered the bowl they disappeared instantly, as if the bowl were much deeper than it appeared. Thinking it was a parlor trick, the king instructed his attendant to continue to pour coins into the bowl; surely there was a limit. But the attendant continued to pour and the coins continued to disappear the moment they touched the bowl's basin. Eventually, the huge sack was completely empty, and yet not a single coin remained in the beggar s bowl. As the king had given his word to fill the bowl—and still remained convinced that it could hold only a small fraction of his wealth—he sent his attendant back to the treasury to refill the sack. In this way the whole scene repeated itself again and again.

After some time, word of the bizarre scene unfolding at the palace gates began to spread. By midday a huge crowd had gathered. Now, the prestige of the king was at stake. His attendants urged him to send the beggar on his way without pouring any more of his wealth into the beggar’s bottomless bowl, but the king declared, “Even if the whole kingdom is lost, so be it—I will not be defeated by this beggar."

Finally the king’s supply of gold coins dwindled to nothing. Yet he continued to empty the treasury into the bowl.

Diamonds, pearls and emeralds—everything put in—immediately disappeared into the vortex. By sundown, the palace treasury had become nothing more than an empty room. All the onlookers stood silent, spellbound. Finally, the king fell at the feet of the beggar and conceded defeat. Before the beggar took his leave, the king himself begged, "You are victorious; that is certain. But before you leave, just tell me one thing: what is this begging bowl made oP"

Laughing, the beggar said, "There is no secret. This bowl is nothing more than the human mind. It can never be satisfied."

In fact, trying to exhaust ones desires by fulfilling them is like trying to extinguish a raging fire by pouring gasoline on it. Each time we give in to our desires, the desires only gain strength. The only way to finally overcome our desires is to use our discrimination to see the inherent flaws in the desired objects. This will give us the inner strength to overcome them.

Several centuries ago in Tamil Nadu there lived a great sage called Patti natthar. Before renouncing the world, Pattinatthar was the wealthiest person in a coastal city called Kavirapoom Pattinam. However, he had been unable to father a child. One day a Brahmin happened to find a baby boy at the foot of a tree. Knowing that Patti natthar badly wanted a son, the Brahmin presented the child to him and

was richly rewarded. Pattinatthar went on to raise the boy as his very own.

After Pattinatthar's son came of age. he asked for his fathers blessing to become a traveling merchant. I hough he was reluctant to see him go. Pattinatthar gave his permission in the hopes that the young man would follow in his footsteps and make him even wealthier than before. Soon after. Pattinatthar's son had hired a ship and set sail for foreign ports.

After a long time, Pattinatthar received word that his son's ship had returned and was docked at the city's port. However, there was a problem; word was spreading that the young man had lost his mental balance and had returned with nothing more than a ship full of rice husks and dried manure. Outraged. Pattinatthar dashed off to see for himself. On the way. he might have crossed paths with his son; by the time Pattinatthar reached the ship, the young man was gone. Upon entering the ship's lower chambers. Pattinatthar saw that what he had heard was true. There was nothing but rice husks and manure—floor to ceiling, wall to wall. Cursing his fate and screaming in fury at his worthless child, Pattinatthar picked up one of the dried manure patties and hurled it against the wall of the ship. Striking the wall, it shattered, sending shiny particles scattering across the room. Looking closer, he saw that the manure patty had been packed full of diamonds, pearls and precious gems.

Picking up a few more patties and breaking them apart, he saw each one was the same. His son had packed it so as to avoid plunder by sea pirates on the way home.

As Pattinatthar raced home, he was blinded by tears—tears of joy at his sons ingenuity and success, and tears of remorse for having so rashly cursed his sons name.

When he returned home, his wife was standing in the doorway with an ashen face. She informed him that their son had already come and gone. The young man had left behind only a small box, asking her to give it to his father when he returned. Inside the box was a note, folded around a tiny sewing needle with a broken eye. The note read, “Even this needle with a broken eye will not accompany you after death." Seeing the note and holding the needle in his hand, the rich man was thunderstruck. For the first time, he realized that despite all his riches, he would leave the world empty-handed. He would not be able to take even the smallest and most useless possession—a needle with a broken eye—along with him. Realizing thus, the rich man decided also to leave hearth and home behind and seek God alone. Before going, he instructed his accountant to distribute his wealth freely to all those in need.

The adopted boy was never seen or heard from again. Many believe that he was an incarnation of the Lord. whose sole purpose was to turn Paninanhar to the spiritual path.

Hearing the news of the rich man's departure from worldly life, the king of the land was shocked. He had even occasionally benefited from Pattinatthar's generosity when the palace treasury was low. The king decided he must go and see him.

The king found Pattinatthar seated on a rock in a desolate place on the outskirts of the city, naked but for a loincloth. Stopping in front of him. the king asked, "What has come over you? You were the wealthiest man in the kingdom. What have you gained by giving up everything?"

Pattinatthar looked up at the king and smiled. "O King, formerly I used to stand out of respect whenever you passed, if you called for me, I would come running to you like a slave. Now, it is you who are standing while I remain seated."

Because Pattinatthar was free of desire, he had nothing to gain by paying respect to the king; the king had nothing to offer him. Realizing the truth of the sage's words, the king merely prostrated at his feet and returned to the palace in silence.

Only someone who has something can truly give it to another. Naturally, the greater one's wealth, the more capacity one will have to give. But Amma says that, "Spirituality is the real wealth. It is this inner wealth that helps one to become 'wealthier than the wealthiest.'" By this definition, Amma is and always has been truly the wealthiest person

in the world. And while she has been distributing huge quantities of her spiritual wealth throughout the world for more than 36 years, it still hasn't diminished even an iota. Though they sometimes don’t even realize its value, everyone who comes for darshan walks away with the diamond of Am ma’s blessing.

*

CHAPTER 8

Managing the Mind

"Lots of folks confuse bad management with destiny. "

—Kin Hubbard

Today, we see the business world and even the military taking real interest in the principles of spirituality, such as the need for stress release and equanimity of mind. The Indian paramilitary forces recently requested that Amma provide meditation training for more than one million of its soldiers. After Amma's brahmacharis began to teach Amma's Integrated Amrita Meditation Technique* (IAM) ar paramilitary centers all over the country (free of charge), the other branches of the military have also begun to request the training. Many business-minded people also come to Amma for advice and guidance, and some corporations have already begun offering IAM Technique to their employees.

It is clear that the principles of spirituality can be applied to business and other fields. But some of the essential principles of business can be applied to practical spirituality as well.

Once, the lights went out in a department store. It was pitch black. The customers could not see anything. A nervous lady, who happened to be standing near a store employee, turned to him and demanded. “Can't you please do something about this?"

“Sorry, ma’am,” the employee replied. “I’m in sales, not management."

Aside from the obvious, this joke illustrates an important point. To be successful in our career—to make a living—it is enough to specialize in one field. We may be in sales but know nothing about management. Or we may be in management but know nothing about sales. However, to be successful in life, we have to learn to be both a salesperson and a manager—we have to be able to sell good things to our mind as well as to manage the challenging situations of life.

Of course, some people may not have a high opinion of managers in general. For example, a man is flying in a hot-air balloon and realizes he is lost. He lowers his altitude and spots a man in a field down below. He lowers the balloon further and shouts, “Excuse me, can you tell me where I am?"

The man below' says: “Yes. You’re in a hot-air balloon, hovering 30 feet above this field.”

“Well, thanks for nothing, pal,” says the balloonist.

The man below responds. “You must work in management.”

“I do," replies the balloonist, "but how did you know?"

“Well,” says the man, “you don’t know where you are or where you’re going, but you expect me to be able to help. You re in the same position you were before we met, but now it’s my fault."

I his is not the type of management we are referring to when we talk about managing the mind. It does not mean using false justifications or pointing fingers to avoid responsibility. It means becoming the master of our mind and all its reactions and responses.

Once, a man was eating breakfast with his family before rushing off to the office to give a presentation at an extremely important meeting that was to decide the fate of his company. As she was reaching for the orange juice, his daughter accidentally knocked over his coffee cup, spilling hot coffee down his front and staining his freshly pressed white shirt. Already worried about the potential outcome of the morning’s meeting, he exploded in anger, harshly scolding his daughter for her carelessness before going to change his shin. On his way out of the house, he found that his daughter was sitting on the front step and crying. Distraught by his outburst, she had missed her bus and needed a ride.

Already late, the man drove well over the speed limit to get his daughter to school and still make it to work on time.

However, he was pulled over by a police officer for speeding and given a lecture and a steep fine. Finally, arriving late for his meeting, the man realized that he had left his briefcase—including all the materials for his presentation—at home. Because he was not able to contribute to the meeting, his company was acquired by a rival corporation and he was summarily let go. Suddenly the man found himself unemployed and alienated from his wife and daughter. Looking back, he saw that all this turmoil stemmed from his overreaction to the spilled cup of coffee. Over this event, he had no control. But if he had been able to control his temper at that moment, the rest of the problems he encountered that day could have been avoided. In this way, a molehill became a mountain.

Amma often tells us that spirituality is the process of learning to manage the mind. However, to do this successfully, we must become an expert salesperson, too. Our mind is a tough customer—it generally refuses to accept what is good for us.

On the other hand, Amma says our mind is also the greatest salesman of all time. It is an expert at selling us its own ideas and choices—typically things that will be enjoyable in the short run but will not lead to our greatest good in the end. Thus we have to learn to become an even better salesperson than our mind, so that we can recognize good deals and bad deals and convince our mind to follow the

right path. Amma gives the example of a child being offered the choice between a bowl of chocolates and a bowl of gold coins. The child will always choose the chocolates because they lead to instant gratification. The child doesn't know that with the gold coins he can buy any amount of chocolate and also pay the dentist to fix his teeth later on.

As adults, we may think this is an easy choice to make, but we are laced with similar choices every day. For example, should we watch IV or meditate? Should we find a way to serve our community or go shopping for a new set of clothes? Should we read the latest mystery thriller or the *Bhagavad Gita?*

It is instructive to look at the story of Nachiketas in the *Katha Upanishad.* In his search for the true knowledge, Nachiketas goes to meet Yama, the Lord of Death. But when Nachiketas asks Yama to instruct him, Yama tries to dissuade him from his search through offers of both worldly and celestial pleasures—a long healthy life, tremendous palaces, celestial damsels and unlimited wealth. Yama is a good salesman, but Nachiketas is a tougher customer. He confidently rejects whatever Yama offers him, refusing to be satisfied with anything short of Arma jnana.

In fact, Yama was only testing Nachiketas to be sure he was a fit disciple before imparting spiritual knowledge to him.

Fortunately for us, Amma is not so exacting. She does not subject us to such stringent tests. Maybe she knows most of us would not pass; rather, seeing the wonderful offers on display, we might just pass out!

Just as a seasoned businessperson studies the market, the competition, and consumer behavior, Amma understands the nature of the world, the nature of human beings, and their attitudes and habits. Amma knows that in todays world, spirituality is a tough product to sell. She sometimes jokes that if God himself were to come to us while we were watching television and offer us enlightenment, we would reply, “O Lord, this program won’t be aired again. As you are eternal, would you mind coming back later?"

TV, mystery thrillers and shopping malls are just a few of the many things that compete for our attention. That’s why Amma is offering us a package deal. When we come to Amma with a desire or a problem, she helps us to fulfill our desire or solve the problem, and at the same time she will slowly help us to turn our mind toward spirituality.

Many young Indians who expressed to Amma a desire to go to America ultimately found jobs there. But over time, as they saw Amma during her semi-annual American tours, they became so inspired by her example that they soon found their only desire was to return to India and live in her ashram.

It is difficult to promote good things to our mind, but Amma makes her products—love, compassion and service—irresistible. So in a way, although her products are all offered free of charge, Amma is also in sales. But she is not restricted to that; she is in management, too.

As the network of humanitarian activities run by the Mata Amritanandamayi Math has grown bigger and bigger, some people may be under the impression that Amma is no longer directly involved in their administration; that she has become just a figurehead. But in fact, however vast the Ashrams network of activities grows, Amma continues to perform the roles of both a macro-manager and a micromanager. Even though Amma spends more than half of each day giving darshan, she is still able to direcdy interact with and advise the thousands of people involved in carrying out the work of the Ashram and maintain a personal relationship with each of her devotees. This is perhaps one of the greatest miracles the world has ever seen.

Amma may very well be the only person on earth who is on a first-name basis with tens of thousands of people. A few years back, shortly after Amma held a program in Kochi, one of the Ashram drivers, who works at Amma's hospital, came for her darshan in Amritapuri. When Amma saw him, she asked, "Hey, where were you during the program in Kochi?"

The driver explained that while he had attended the program, seeing how many people came to receive her darshan, he had not wanted to add to her burden. “I thought you were too busy," he explained.

“Who was busy—you or me?” Amma asked him. “You should have come for darshan."

The driver was shocked, realizing Amma had noticed his absence, even more so that she would think to ask him about it. Standing nearby, I was also surprised. After all, would any CEO be concerned over the absence of one among hundreds of drivers? But Amma spoke to him as if she had al) the time in the world.

1 have often wondered if Amma has somehow found a way to put more than 24 hours in a single day without anyone else being aware of it. Of course, it is worth remembering that all those who have done great things had only 24 hours in a day. Likewise, both criminals and those who are wasting away their time also have only 24 hours in a day. Ultimately, then, what we are able to accomplish all depends on how we make use of the time available to us.

The following stories illustrate the extent to which Amma is still involved in the day-to-day activities of her institutions.

The first story was shared with me by one of the brahmacharis who is overseeing the Amritapuri campus of Amma’s university. In addition to the existing School

of Engineering, School of Biotechnology and College of Ayurveda, last year a new School of Arts & Sciences was opened at this campus and, this year, a new School of Social Work. With the expansion, it became clear some additional computers were needed. The brahmachari asked the department heads to hold discussions with their staff and to report back to him with the total number of computers needed. Some time later, the department heads presented an official request for 150 additional computers. Impressed with their research and effort, the brahmachari straightaway took the request to Amma. But when he presented the figures to Amma, she responded, “Why do you want to spend so much money needlessly? You should really do your homework before presenting such a request."

The brahmachari did not protest but went away with a heavy heart. He wondered, “Why is Amma saying that? After all, the staff conducted such a detailed study and consulted with everyone concerned.” Later that night, as he was tossing and turning in bed, unable to sleep, suddenly he realized that what Amma had said was correct. “You should really do your homework,” she had said. And it was true—he had not conducted the study himself; he had only collected it from the various departments and accepted it at face value. Realizing this, he stayed up the rest of the night looking at the various facts and figures. Finally he realized that, not having access to each others

information, the department heads were unaware of the ways in which they could share resources. And in fact, not 150 hut only 90 computers were really needed. Through this simple realization, he was able to save more than a million rupees. The next day he returned to Amma with a revised proposal. Before he said a word, Amma looked up at him and smiled. In the midst of giving darshan, she asked him, “Did you do your homework?" He told Amma his findings, and she told him to go ahead with the purchase.

One of the Ashram’s newer projects is named *Matru Gramam,*or Mother’s Village. With this project, the Ashram has started womens cooperatives in the villages around the ashram where the families have traditionally relied on fishing as their sole source of income. In the past, if the catch was poor, or if something happened to their husband at sea, these women and their children would simply go hungry. Now, the Ashram is providing them with the training and material support to manufacture and sell various products in their own communities. These cooperatives are manufacturing everything from shoes, chocolates and school uniforms to saris, fish products and pickles. There are already more than 600 such cooperatives, but still Amma shows a great deal of interest in monitoring each group’s progress.

Recently, one such group of ladies brought Amma a milk sweet they had produced and planned to start selling soon. Though Amma was very busy giving darshan to

a large crowd of devotees that day, she took the time to stop and taste the fruit of these ladies' efforts. As soon as she tasted it, she could tell something was wrong. As she questioned the ladies about their preparation method, it became clear they had substituted palm oil for ghee in order to save money. Amma explained to them that the palm oil was spoiling the taste. She then called the brahmachari in charge of the ashram's kitchen and asked him to show the ladies how to prepare the sweet using the proper ingredients. Though this was only one of more than 600 such groups in just one of the Ashram's many projects, Amma was still intent on making sure it was being done right.

Amma says, "Nothing is insignificant. A plane can crash even if just a few tiny screws are missing from a vital component. Everything has its own place in God's creation. Nothing can be disregarded."

In fact, Amma has always taken a lot of interest in small details that might easily be overlooked. Many years back, after the construction of the ashram's main temple, we heard that Amma had gone to the roof. When we reached there, we found Amma crouching down, searching intently as if for lost gold. When we got closer, we saw her picking up all the bent nails and small pieces of scrap metal left over from the construction. We couldn't imagine why Amma was giving such importance to this debris. Without our asking, Amma explained that when the ashram was full.

people would need to sleep on the roof and that they might puncture their feet on such pieces of metal. If such a person were diabetic, it could create a serious infection that they might not be able to afford to get treated. Furthermore, Amma said, the scrap metal was not garbage but could be sold to raise money to feed and care for the poor.

Even today, Amma has the same attention to detail. During her 2007 North Indian Tour, after Amma's program in Bangalore we made the long drive to reach Hyderabad in time for her program there the following morning. Even though Amma had neither eaten nor slept, late that night she came out of her room to survey the scene. It was just before midnight so there were relatively few people awake and she was able to move freely about the grounds. The stage had been set up in the school's courtyard, which had been carved out of the side of a hill, and what had escaped the attention of the program's organizers was immediately clear to Amma: there wasn't enough space in the courtyard to accommodate everyone who would come for the program. Amma then proceeded to walk around the perimeter above the dug-out courtyard. In each place she would set up a chair and then sit down, peering down to see if she could see the stage from each spot. If she could not, she would point out how the view could be unobstructed. She was so concerned that each and every person would be able to see

the stage. Seeing this, I was wondering how many other people who are scheduled to appear in front of such huge crowds would give so much importance to each and every individual attending the program.

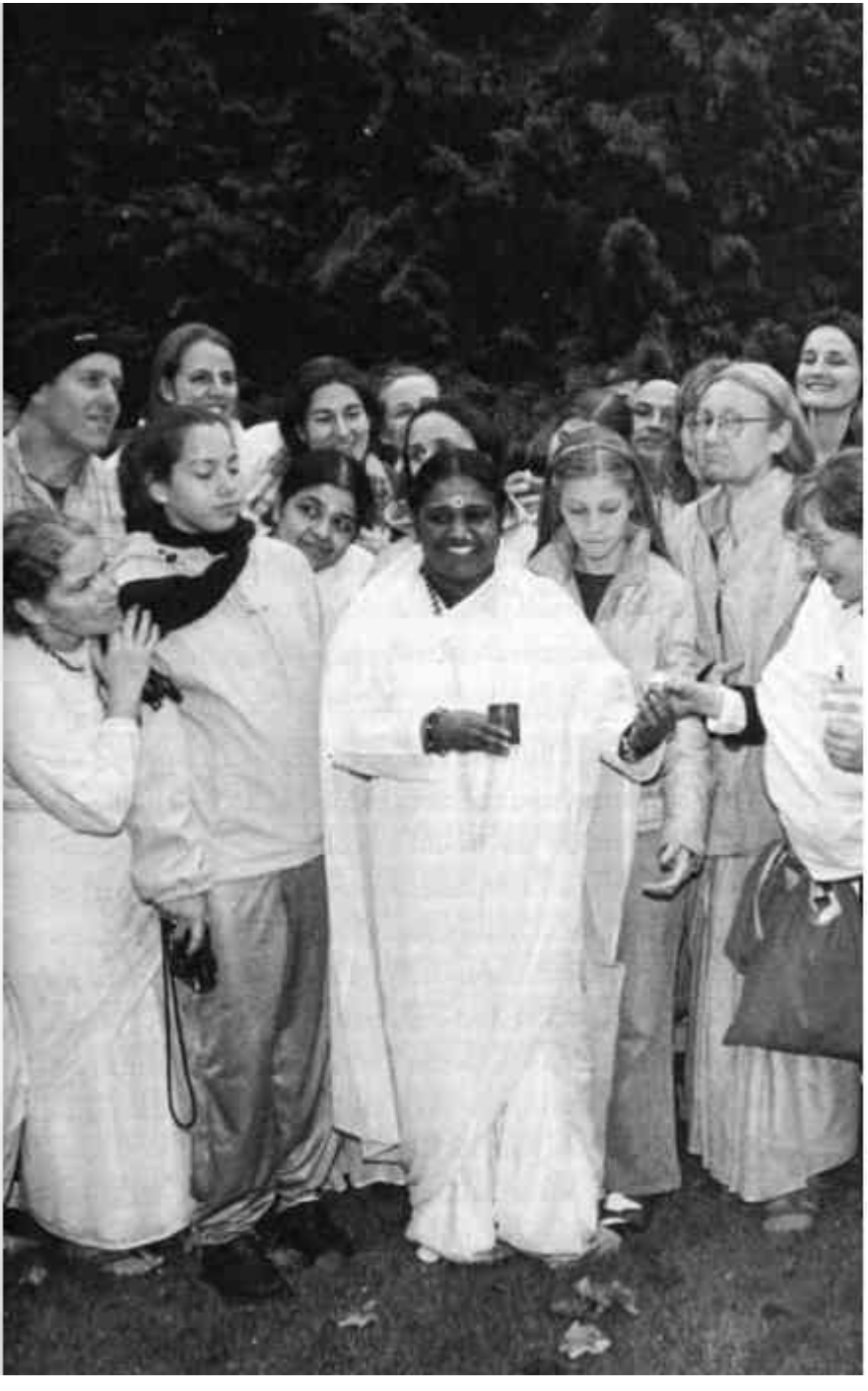
I have shared just a few examples of Amma's exemplary micro- and macro-management, but every day there are many more. Being the master of her own mind, Amma is able to manage every situation perfectly.

Amma wants to help us to learn to manage our minds as well. Not because there is something in it for her, but because she knows that it is the only thing that will bring us lasting peace and happiness. And she is willing to spend all day and all night to help us do so. She has dedicated her life to service—from counting computers to holding thousands of individuals in her arms every day, from checking the ingredients in sweets to helping people cultivate devotion to God through her daily bhajan sessions, from picking up scrap metal to educating people about their true nature in her satsangs. Amma's mind is completely empty of selfish desires; it has been mastered once and for all.

I have heard about two-day spiritual retreats hosted by a certain celebrity where the celebrity spends just 45 minutes a day with the retreat participants. Once someone asked him, "We are spending all this time and money just to be with you. So why don't you spend more time talking to us?" The celebrity answered, "There is only so much wisdom

the human mind can absorb at one time. If I spend more time with you, it will be wasted."

In contrast, on a typical two-and-a-half-day retreat with Amma, she spends more than 40 hours with her children. Amma never feels that her time is wasted by spending it with us. She tells us that if we try to grow apples in Kerala, it will be next to impossible—even if we manage to succeed, the quality of the apples will be very poor. Whereas, apples grown in Kashmir will be of high quality and taste. The atmosphere must be conducive for every undertaking. Similarly, the presence of the true master will provide the most conducive atmosphere in which to learn how to manage our mind.



CHAPTER 9

Amma's Secret Recipe

"The beauty and charm of selfless service should never die away from the face of this earth. The world should know that a life of dedication is possible, that a life inspired by love and service is possible. "

-Amma

Amma's network of humanitarian activities is always an the rise, but still she never ceases to surprise us. When she completed the construction of 25,000 homes in 2002, we thought she would be content with the accomplishment. But she immediately announced a new goal of 100,000 additional houses nationwide. When the tsunami struck in 2004, she astounded us all with what has become a $46 million relief-and-rehabilitation package. When Hurricane Katrina struck the United States, she surprised her American devotees with a million-dollar donation to the Bush-Clinton Katrina Relief Fund.

One of the most striking things about Amma is her unshakable certainty in implementing these massive initia-

lives. The spontaneity with which Amma acts is proof of this certainty. During her visit to Mumbai in March 2007, Amma was invited for a high-level meeting with the Chief Minister of Maharashtra to discuss the suicide epidemic among impoverished farmers. After the meeting. Amma surprised everyone once again by suddenly saying that she would be starting a new initiative to help remedy the situation. The first two steps of the massive relief package include sponsoring the education of 100,000 children of impoverished farmers and the provision ot training and start-up capital to 5,000 cottage-industry collectives of women belonging to impoverished agricultural families. Both initiatives are aimed at reducing the financial burden placed on the farmers' families and helping them achieve financial independence.

It was clear that this was yet another multi-million-dollar relief package, and everyone around Amma was stunned. "What was Amma saying? From where was Amma going to get all this money?" Usually when we spend a large amount of money on something, we will first go through a period of agonizing uncertainty. But there wasn't rhe slightest hint of hesitation or regret on Amma's face.

Recently at Amritapuri, Amma received Olara Otunnu, former President of the UN Security Council and Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations. When asked for

his impression of Amma's humanitarian work, he said, "I think the UN and other NGOs have something to learn from Amma and what she has been able to build."

Amma explains that when the government allocates money for relief projects, much of it is used for wages. She is not finding fault with the government; of course, the government has to pay its employees' salaries, and the government machinery needs to be maintained. But the end result is like pouring oil from one glass to another down a line. "In the end, you don't have any oil left," Amma says. "All of it has been lost, sticking to the sides of all the glasses. In this way, 1,000 rupees becomes 100 rupees by the time it reaches the people. Whereas, if the Ashram gets 10 rupees, we add our effort to it and, in effect, the money multiplies."

Mr. Otunnu also commented during his visit to Amritapuri, "One of the problems that we face in international relief work is how much of the resources mobilized to support those in need go to those who are providing support—the personnel. The overheads tend to be quite high relative to what actually ends up benefiting the people who are truly in need. Looking at Amma's organization, I was struck by how much of what is generated, how much of the money that is mobilized, actually goes and benefits direcdy those in need. This is remarkable. It was very striking for me to see how she managed to get that formula right."

To get a formula right, you have to have the right ingredients. With Amma's recipe of renunciation, relentless dedication and selfless love, anything is possible.

Amma's first visit to South America in July 2007 clearly illustrates this truth. Her first program was held in Santiago, Chile, a metropolis nesded in the Andes Mountains. If there was any question regarding how the people of Santiago would respond to Amma, it was answered at the first darshan session. Almost as soon as the sun rose over the Andes, an enormous crowd began to descend upon the convention center. The massive hall was filled well before Amma's arrival, and when Amma did arrive, she was greeted by thunderous applause. In fact, for the next three days, every time Amma arrived, left or finished singing a bhajan, applause followed. It was clear that the people of Santiago saw in Amma what people have been seeing in her all across the world for the past 20 years—God's love in a human body.

During the morning programs, Amma was surrounded by every major press agency in the country. Her visit to Chile was truly a major news event. During the next three days, the crowds were so large that each program blended into the next with almost no break.

Before leaving Chile, Amma met with several of the local devotees who had helped organize the program. Everyone felt it was truly amazing that the programs had gone

so smoothly, when none of the people involved had ever organized a program before and the majority of volunteers had not even met Amma before her visit. In fact, many of the volunteers had taken a week or more off work in order to dedicate themselves full time to ensuring the programs success. Gazing lovingly into the eyes of her Santiago children, Amma asked, “How did you do it?”

Immediately one of them replied, “It was our love for you that gave us strength and inspiration."

Hearing this, Amma nodded approvingly and smiled, saying, “Where there is love, anything is possible.”

Amma has not only been practicing this formula of success in her own life, but through careful guidance and her own impeccable example, she has been able to inculcate the same values in her disciples and devotees all over the world.

In the earlier days, free food was given to everyone who came to the ashram. 'The ashram residents would eat last and Amma, last of all. Many times, when all the guests had been served, there was no food remaining, and the residents themselves had to go without. In those days some of us would go out and buy groceries for the ashram. But often we did not have enough money to purchase what was needed. On one such occasion, one of the brahmacharis was worried that we would be completely out of food for the coming week. When we asked Amma what we should

do, she replied, “Don’t worry. Whenever there is a need, God will provide. Money will come, and money will go. That’s none of your concern. Go and meditate.”

The brahmachari tried to follow Amma’s instructions, but of course he could not meditate very well, because he was so worried, not only for the devotees but also about from where his own next meal would come. However, the very next day someone came and gave a thousand-rupee donation. At that time, we looked at a thousand rupees as if it was a million dollars. With that money we went out and bought the provisions for the coming week.

Now that the Ashram is in a better position financially, when we look back, we can sec that even though those days were very hard in many ways, they were priceless, both for us as individuals and for the Ashram—Amma was teaching us about the value of spending wisely and not wasting resources. It is these very principles that have allowed Amma and her Ashram to achieve so much with so little.

And as always, Amma has been the perfect example of her own teaching. Even today, after initiating and carrying out such massive relief projects. Amma is very careful not to spend even a small amount of money unnecessarily. For example, whereas the natural inclination would be to use the best paper possible when writing a letter to Amma, there are more than 3,000 residents in the ashram, and each one unburdens his or heart to Amma through writing

letters to her. Thus, Amma always asks that waste paper (with something already printed on one side) be used for letters and even reports from the accounting department in the Ashram. Even though it can be distracting to read reports printed on such paper, Amma has said that in this way, we can save money—which can then be used to provide medicine, food, clothing or shelter for someone in need—and reduce deforestation as well.

Amma always says that it is grace that makes all our efforts bear fruit in the right way. It is not enough just to work hard and save money; after all, the money has to come from somewhere. But about that, Amma has never had any doubt. Even today, when Amma discusses the new projects she is intending to launch, the question invariably arises: “Amma, where is the money going to come from?” Amma replies in the same tone she used all those years ago when asked about the money for the Ashrams groceries. “Money will come and money will go. God will provide everything that is needed."

CHAPTER **10**

Escaping the Net of Maya

"Before we set our hearts too much upon anything, let us examine how happy those are who already possess it. "

-Francois de Li Rochefoucauld

"What makes humility so desirable is the marvelous thing it does to us; it creates in us a capacity for the closest possible intimacy with God. "

-Monica Baldwin

In Tamil Nadu, there are four saints who are together known as the four masters of *Shaivism** One of these four masters was Sundarar, who was born in a village called Tirunavaloor. At birth, he was given the name Nambiaroorar, but he was such a remarkably handsome child that he was also known as Sundarar (Beautiful One). One day, as the king was passing by in his chariot, Sundarar was playing by the side of the road. As soon as the king laid eyes on the boy, he was so attracted by the child's remarkable beauty that he got down from the chariot and started playing with him. Soon he discovered that, in fact, this was the son of

[8] **Shaivism encompasses the traditions of Hinduism that focus on the worship of lord Shiva.**

his good friend. Going to his friends house, the king asked his friend to give the child to him. The kings friend had no choice but to agree to the proposal.

Thus, the king raised Sundarar as his own son, ensuring that his every need was cared for and that he was well-versed in the scriptures and the eternal human values. When the boy came of age, arrangements were made to marry him to an eligible young lady. As the marriage was about to take place, an old Brahmin approached Sundarar and informed him, “There is a legal case pending between us. Only after settling this issue can you marry.”

Totally confused, Sundarar asked him, “What do you mean? What legal case?"

Addressing the gathered well-wishers, the old man cried, “Listen all of you—this youth is my slave!”

Everyone present was dumbfounded. But Sundarar himself was unimpressed by the Brahmins claims. “I am the adopted son of the king—how can 1 possibly be your slave?" Sundarar scoffed.

The old man was undeterred. “A long time ago,’ he explained, “your grandfather was my slave and he signed a contract saying that all his future generations would also be my slaves. Therefore, you should not scorn me."

“You’re a crazy old fellow,” Sundarar protested and began laughing merrily.

“You jest, but I have proof of my claims," the old man

continued. Holding up a palm leaf covered in script, he said, “Here is rhe contract signed by your grandfather.”

Without a word, Sundarar snatched the palm leaf and tore it to shreds.

The old man cried foul, saying, “How can you ignore a signed contract?” Then addressing the crowd, he insisted, “The agreement must be honored!"

The crowd tried to mollify him, saying, “Your claim is strange—never before have we heard of a Brahmin becoming a slave to another Brahmin.”

“Still," the old man persisted. “Sundarar is my slave, and I am his master. I am from Thiruvennai Nalloor, and he must return there with me and live in my service."

As the old man was insistent, the king agreed that some of his council should proceed to the old mans village and consult with their council of elders to see if the old Brahmin's claim could be substantiated.

So it was that Sundarar, some of the king's men and the old Brahmin walked in a procession to the old man's village. When they reached there, the old man brought the procession to the villages council of elders. But the elders, too, found the man a stranger—no one had seen him before. Still, as he claimed to be from that village, they agreed to hear out his case. After he laid out his claims and related the day’s events, one among the council commented, “Now

that Sundarar has torn the palm leaf, you have no proof of your claims."

The old man said, “That was only a copy—I have with me the original contract signed by his grandfather." So saying, the old man produced another palm leaf and held it aloft.

After examining it carefully and comparing it with village records, the council pronounced the contract valid and told Sundarar, “Strange as this case may be, you are indeed his slave. You have no choice but to serve him as he commands."

Then, addressing the old man, the elders said, "You say you are from this village, and the contract also identifies you as belonging to this place, but none of us have ever seen you before. Where in fact is your house? Please show us the place where you live.”

The old Brahmin replied, “Come with me, and I will show you my house."

Everyone followed him with great interest. The Brahmin led them to the center of the town, where the village Shiva temple was located. Without glancing left or right, he walked straight up the temple steps. Setting foot inside the sanctum sanctorum, he vanished into thin air.

Wonderstruck, Sundarar fell to his knees. Overcome with devotion to the Lord, his eyes flooded with tears. Sud-

denly Lord Shiva appeared before him with Goddess Parvati at his side. Shiva explained, “I came to save you from the clutches of *maya* (illusion).”" Before disappearing again, Shiva commented. “The song soaked in love is the best *archana* (worship) for me.” After this, Sundarar composed many beautiful songs to Lord Shiva, which are still sung today. For the rest of his days, Sundarar continued to view himself as the lord’s servant.

Here it is worth remembering that Sundarar had the opportunity to spend just a few moments in the presence of a divine incarnation, whereas Amma has come to us for a lifetime. It is left to us to make the best use of the opportunity.

There is a beautiful saying about the two methods used by disciples of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa to escape from the net of maya, or the illusion of objective reality. It is said that while Nagamahasaya—one of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa’s householder disciple—became so small that he could slip through the holes in the mesh of Maya’s net, whereas his monastic disciple Swami Vivekananda became so big that the net could no longer cover him.

Likewise, Amma teaches us that we should either try to become nothing or to become everything. That is to

According io Advaita Vedanta, it is maya that causes the jivatma to erroneously identify itself with the body, mind and intellect, instead of its true identity the Paramatma.

say, we either become so humble that our ego disappears and we merge in the absolute, or we expand our minds until we lose all sense of our self as a limited individual and identify only with the totality. But at present, most of us are unwilling to follow cither course. We don't want to become everything, and we don't want to become nothing. Rather, we all want to become something.

Of course, Amma tells us we are the "essence of Om"; the scriptures tell us we are Brahman; other spiritual seekers tell us we are one with God. All these are different ways of saying the same thing—that our true nature is unlimited, eternal and blissful. But what is our experience, after ail? Our experience is not that we are That, but rather a limited individual, full of petty fears, anger, doubt and pain.

So, if we don't feel like the Supreme Consciousness, one would think we would act with humility. But we're not exactly ready to do that, either. "You sec," we tell ourselves, "I'm not just any old nobody. I'm *somebody.* No one else can compare to me." These are the kind of thoughts that run through our mind.

In fact, rather than putting forth effort to transcend our ego and realize our oneness with the Supreme, weare more concerned about strengthening our ego and our necessarily limited individuality. The scriptures say that fundamentally, ignorance can be defined as the notion of "I" as a limited individual. From that misconception, all

other misconceptions arise. From that notion springs forth every need, ever)' desire, every sense of threat or fear. If we have a separate sense of self, that self needs to be protected, to be loved, to be praised, to be preserved.

When we look closely at the way we spend our energy, on what we say and what we do throughout the day, we find that almost every action and word of ours is designed to secure the approval and praise of others, to carve out a niche for ourselves. Even the clothes we wear, the way our hair is styled and cut, the way we sign our name, is more often than not for the sole purpose of attracting the attention and approval of others. If you disagree with this point, try doing a good deed without anyone else's knowledge and then notice how difficult it is not to tell anyone about it.

Ultimately, only a true master can remove our deep-rooted desire for recognition. One dark night, two men were walking home after a party and decided to take a shortcut through a cemetery. Halfway through their passing, they were startled by a tapping noise coming from the misty shadows. Trembling with fear, they followed the sound only to find an old man with a hammer and chisel, chipping away at a headstone reading HERE LIES JACK BROWN.

“Wow, mister," one of them exclaimed after catching his breath, “You scared us half to death. We thought you were a ghost! What are you doing working here so late at night?”

“Those fools, the old man grumbled in reply without looking up from his work. “They’ forgot to write ‘Doctor’ on my headstone!"

Eventually, the desire for approval manifests as a desire to be famous. In todays world, we can see that everyone, especially young people, would like more than anything else to be famous. There are televised competitions in almost every field of art or action designed to catapult the winner into fame. Almost everyone accepts that becoming a celebrity is a worthy goal, perhaps higher than any other. But when we are appraising the value of a particular asset, the first logical step is to look at those who have already attained that asset, and determine the extent to which they have benefited. In applying this principle to fame, we must look at the lives of celebrities. Has their fame made them happier, more peaceful, more fulfilled?

On the contrary, there are countless cases of celebrities whose lives fall to pieces at the height of their stardom. Certainly, all such troubled stars were equally convinced that fame would bring only happiness and contentment. But dearly, external fame does not lead to any significant change in ones external circumstances. One who is insecure, depressed or angry in obscurity will find themselves the same person in fame.

Arjuna was one of the most powerful warriors of his time. In spite of that, when faced with the prospect of battling

his own relatives—and even his archcry teacher—who had sided with the Kauravas, he became despondent and helpless. When faced with a real crisis, all his fame and fortune was useless. It was only Sri Krishna's guidance that lifted him out of the quagmire of indecision and despair.

Recently, a major magazine interviewed Amma. One of their questions was, "A lot of celebrities around the world have been coming to Amma for her blessings and advice. For ordinary people, these people seem to have a great life already, making a lot of money and enjoying so much fame. But what does Amma think of these people's happiness?"

Amma replied, "They have come to Amma due to their deep introspection. They have understood that worldly life is limited and that there is more to life than the human intellect can perceive. Through experience, they have started to understand the limitation of worldly life; they come to Amma to find out how to obtain peace of mind."

One of Amma's American disciples recently ran into an old friend of his at one of Amma's programs in the United States. They had been best friends during their school days. After college, one of them had gone to a small fishing village in southwest India to join Amma's Ashram as a brahmachari, while the other had joined what later became a world-famous rock band. Even though both ended up touring the world, they were certainly moving in different spheres.

After recognizing one another, they started talking; the brahmachari shared some of his experiences of living with Amma, and the rock star spoke of the things he had seen and done over the years. He said that he had performed before audiences of tens of thousands of enthusiastic fans, and now had enough money in the bank to live lavishly for the rest of his life. However, as he recounted his adventures, his enthusiasm trailed off along with his words, and it was clear that he had not found the life of fame and fortune to be everything it was cracked up to be.

The rock star explained that now he was looking for something deeper and more meaningful in life. The brahmachari took him up for darshan, and the rock star was obviously moved by the experience. Within a few months, he came to Amma's ashram in India and was proud to say that he had given up all drugs and intoxicants. He even brought his latest album to Amma for her blessings.

In a way, famous people are uniquely positioned to turn toward spirituality. So many of us think we will be happy only when we achieve certain material goals. But these celebrities have reached the end of the rainbow, as it were, and find that something is still missing. In truth, happiness does not come from acquiring something in the external world. Rather, it is a process of becoming free from something we now have but do not need. That something is the ego, or the feeling of "I" and "mine."

Once, a man prayed to God, “O Lord, I want happiness.” And the reply came from within, “My son, when you remove the T and the ‘want,’ then you will automatically have happiness.”

Another shortcut to happiness is to perform our actions with love. It is true that we all have many responsibilities and many actions we are compelled to perform. But we are not compelled to dislike these chores. We should remember that for any action we dislike, there are people who love to do that same action. So we can come to like any karma, or action. When we learn to like an action, that karma itself will give us *ananda,* or bliss. We need not wait for the result of the action, or *karma phalam,* to experience bliss.

The greatest benefit of finding happiness in the action itself, rather than waiting for the result of the action, is that it is instantaneous. It is also un-obstructable by *prarabdha karma* (the results of our past actions destined to bear fruit in one’s current lifetime). Prarabdha karma can affect the results of our actions and prevent us from achieving the result we had in mind, but it can never block us from enjoying the actions we perform.

Recently a journalist asked Amma, “Don’t you feel sad that you have no private time anymore and that you can no longer, for example, go out to the seashore at night to meditate?”

Amma replied. “It was always my desire to love others, to serve others and to wipe their tears. There is no need to

think of anything that I am unable to do and be sad about it because I am doing what I want to be doing. Back then it was like that; now it is like this."

I he same journalist followed up with another question. "In the beginning, none of this was here. It all started with just one small hut and just a handful of people around you. Now, there are so many buildings, projects and institutions here, your presence is sought at international forums around the world, and wherever you go, you are the center of attention amid such huge throngs of people. How do you feel about all these radical changes?"

Ammas answer illustrates the real secret of her equanimity of mind. "The external situation may have changed, but I am always the same. What I was then, I am now."

Amma doesn't want to become something. The essence of her greatness is in the fact that she knows she is everything, yet behaves as though she were nothing. Explaining how everything looks from her transcendent perspective, Amma has said. "The entire universe exists as a tiny bubble within the vast expanse of my Consciousness." Such is the expansivcncss of her vision and experience.

If we really want to become humble like Amma, we only have to try to perceive the universe as it really is. That is enough to understand our relative insignificance.

It is worth taking a moment to consider the basic facts of astronomy. First, try to visualize the distance of one light year: 5.9 trillion miles, or the distance traveled in going

around the Earth 240 million times. Now, the diameter of our galaxy, the Milky Way, is about 100,000 of those light years. And as if that weren't already enough to make us feel totally inconsequential, consider that the latest estimates say that there are about 125 billion galaxies like ours in the universe. Meanwhile, we spend all our energy trying to convince others of just how great we really are or arguing over whether our property line is six inches to this side or seven inches to that side.

One of Amma's brahmacharis recounted to me a story about how Amma taught him a lesson in humility. Shortly after receiving initiation as a brahmachari, as he walked about the ashram wearing his new yellow robes, the devotees began bowing down and touching his feet as a sign of respect. This treatment continued for a few days, but the brahmachari soon had to travel outside the ashram to look into one of Amma's projects. When the newly ordained brahmachari left the ashram, his bags were packed with his new robes, but his mind was also packed—with subconscious expectations of royal treatment during his journey.

To his surprise, nobody paid him particular attention or any special courtesy, and in some places it seemed they were making sarcastic comments about him. He returned to the ashram several days later, upset and agitated by his experience. One night soon after his return, he had a chance to go to Amma's room. She was expecting one of the lo-

cal village leaders, who had pleaded for an opportunity to meet Amma in private. Even though the man was just a local authority, when he entered the room, Amma stood up humbly and offered him a chair. The village leader was so touched by Amma's humility that he instead bowed down and sat respectfully at her feet.

The young brahmachari, too, was struck by Amma's humility. Suddenly, he realized how foolish he had been to expect special treatment. Who was he to expect anything special from the world when even his spiritual master, worshipped as the Divine Mother by millions the world over, expected nothing from anyone? It was a simple act by Amma, but it served to free him from the bondage of his expectations.

As we are identified with our body, mind and intellect, the opinion of others matters greatly to us. But Amma says, in truth, we are not like candles that depend on others to be lit, but like the self-effulgent sun that shines brilliantly of its own accord. As long as we depend on others, we are at their mercy. To resolve this problem, Amma recommends that we search for God's presence within and learn to depend on that—for it is verily our True Self.

In this way, instead of attempting to draw others' attention to ourselves, we begin to pay attention to others. Rather than being self-conscious, we become conscious of the Self in all living beings.

CHAPTER 11

A New Theory of Evolution

"An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity."

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

We are all familiar with Darwin s theory of evolution, which says that all living beings have evolved into their current physical forms and habits through millions of years of natural selection and adaptation. But for physical evolution there can be no final goal, no completion or perfection. True perfection can only be attained within.

Furthermore, it seems this process of evolution has begun to reverse itself. Amma says there are three types of people: *prakriti* (natural), *vikriti* (perverted), and *samskriti* (refined). If a prakriti person receives some food, he will simply eat whatever he is given. Whereas, a vikriti person will not only eat his share but will also snatch as much food as he can from others. But a samskriti personality will first share his food with others before taking anything for himself. Amma says human beings should evolve from prakriti to samskriti, but unfortunately in the present day

and age most people are actually devolving from prakriti to vikriti. While it is said that the monkey evolved into a human being, as human beings have become more and more selfish and self-centered, it seems that they are climbing back down the evolutionary ladder.

Once an elderly farmer passed away, and a grand country funeral was arranged for him, attended by all his friends and relatives. The pastor talked at great length about all the good traits of the deceased, what an honest man he had been, and what a loving husband and kind father he had been. Finally, the widow leaned over and whispered to one of her children, “Go up there and take a look in the coffin and sec if that’s really your father in there."

In todays world, we find it difficult to believe even in the goodness of people very close to us. However, Amma always says she believes in the innate goodness of her children. She has even more faith than we do in our ability to evolve as human beings.

We often justify our behavior and the impulses to which we fall prey, saying, “Its only natural” or, “We are only human.” But Amma teaches us how to raise our lower nature to the level of our ideals, and not vice versa. Amma has said that her life is proof that it is possible to realize the Supreme Truth amidst countless worldly duties, even in the most unfavorable of conditions.

What is needed, then, is a theory that explains spiritual evolution. Instead of focusing on how the outer instruments evolve, we need to understand the principles governing our inner evolution. We need to understand the method by which our inner instruments, such as the mind, intellect and ego can be purified. This process naturally unfolds when we regularly engage in spiritual practices and imbibe the spiritual truths. Through this process we come to gradually understand and abide in our own true divine nature.

Sometimes people wonder, “Why do people worship Amma? After all, isn’t she human, just like the rest of us?" The answer is: “Yes, Amma is human,"— she is a true human being in the real sense of the word. All the noble qualities that differentiate humans from beasts are fully present in Amma.

We can learn a lot from the current spate of movies about superheroes. One after another, we sec the billboards advertising these movies. Clearly, people are subconsciously craving something beyond the mundane, beyond the confines of the human domain. We want to believe that there is some superhuman potential within us, that we can go beyond our present limitations, it gives us a temporary feeling of exhilaration to see superheroes fly, bend steel and defeat the super-villain, but when the credits begin to roll, we are once again faced with the reality of our ow n limitations.

In fact, it is the same subconscious yearning that makes us love Amma so much. After all, Amma is a real-life superhero—she bends steel hearts, flies around the world and helps us to defeat the inner super-villain of our negative tendencies with her white, cape-like sari flowing in the wind.

Through the example of her own life, Amma shows us that it is possible to go beyond the human limitations we identify with and become a spiritual superhuman. In the case of the cinematic superheroes, we can sometimes find an ulterior motive behind their actions. In other words, they may be superhuman physically, but mentally they arenot much different from ordinary human beings.

In Amma's case, however, there are no ulterior motives behind her actions. Her compassion is truly unconditional. She doesn't even expect credit for what she does. When she accepted the *Janies Parks Morton Interfaith Award* in New York in 2006, she humbly stated, "In fact, it is only because of the selflessness and self-sacrifice of millions of devotees around the world that I have been able to offer some service to society. Actually, this award and recognition goes to them. I am only an instrument."

One of the greatest proofs of the genuineness of Amma's compassion and love is that these qualities spontaneously manifested as soon as she was old enough to act on her own. At that time, there were no people of spiritual wisdom or

opportunities for satsang in the area. And until she was twenty years of age, she never ventured more than six miles from her house. In spite of that, Amma always acted in perfect accordance with dharma. When a journalist asked her where she received her guidance, she simply explained that she has always done whatever she felt was right. “For me," Amma says, “everything comes from within. I am attuned to the True Self." Amma has never been interested in displaying miracles. But her unconditional love is the greatest miracle of all.

Once there was an island paradise wherein dwelled all the human qualities personified. One day the sea began to rise, and it became clear that the island would likely be submerged. All the qualities left the island one by one; only Love stayed behind. Without thinking of herself, she wanted to be sure that everyone else was safely evacuated. When everyone else was gone and the island was almost totally submerged, only then did she realize that she too would have to leave the island if she were to survive. Just then Wealth was passing by in a grand boat. Love asked, “Wealth, may I come with you on your boat?"

Wealth shook his head. “I’m sorry, but my boat is full of silver and gold. There is no room for you here."

Then Love decided to ask Vanity, who was passing by in a beautiful vessel. “Vanity, please help me!"

“I can't help you," Vanity replied with a hint of disgust.

“You are all wet and will tarnish my beautiful boat.”

Next Love saw Sadness passing by. “Sadness," she called. “Please take me with you."

Sadness answered, “Sorry, Love—I just need to be alone right now.”

Seeing Happiness, Love’s heart leapt with hope. “Happiness, please give me a lift.” But Happiness was so overjoyed that he had been rescued, he did not hear Love’s call.

Finally Love resigned herself to her fate. Just as she was almost submerged along with the island, she heard a voice say kindly, “Come, Love, I will take you with me.” Love did not recognize the speaker; she could see only that it was the voice of an elder. The elder welcomed her onto his boat and escorted her to dry land. Love was so overcome with gratitude that she forgot to ask the elder his name, and after seeing Love to safety, he went on his way.

As she watched him disappearing in the distance, she saw Knowledge passing by. “Who was it that helped me?” Love asked.

“It was Time,” Knowledge replied.

“Why did Time help me when no one else would?” Love asked.

Knowledge smiled wryly and replied, “Only Time is capable of understanding the greatness of Love.”

When Ammawas interviewed by ABC s *20/20,* at one point the correspondent, astonished by all the work that

Amma was doing in the world, asked in disbelief, “Is that all the world needs? Love? An embrace? Is it as simple as that?” Amma corrected him, “Love is not ordinary. Love is what sustains life. It is extraordinary. Everything is based on love. Love is the source."

CHAPTER 12

Seeing is Believing: How Amma's Love Changes Lives

"A human being is a part of the whole, called by us 'Universe,' a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest—a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty. "

—Albert Einstein

Recently, I read an interview with a man who decided to give free hugs to strangers. He had set up a sign on a street corner, but as no one was taking him up on his offer, he began walking up to people and offering to embrace them, free of charge. Most people he approached turned and walked quickly in the other direction. Many women were offended, thinking he was trying to pick them up.

Out of every thousand people he offered hugs, only one or two took him up on the offer. This is exactly the result that would be expected, isn't it? After all, who would be crazy enough to accept a hug from a stranger?

And yet, in Amma's case, a similar scene unfolds, but with altogether different results. I recall once when Amma was in an airport on her way from one program to another, and she was giving darshan to some of the devotees who had organized the preceding program and had accompanied her to the airport. An onlooker—a businessman who had nothing to do with our group—was watching the scene with apparent distaste. Initially, he was merely glancing over the top of his newspaper from time to time. But as the crowd around Amma began to grow, and as other businesspeople, airport officials, and even a few of the airport police began to join the queue for Amma's embrace, his newspaper dropped to his lap. Finally, he also joined the line for Amma's darshan.

Later on, after Amma and most of the devotees had boarded the plane, I glanced back and saw the businessman sitting alone again. He had not gone back to his newspaper. Rather, he was blinking back tears, staring out the window at the plane Amma had just boarded.

So what is the difference? Why did the man on the street corner meet with such miserable results, whereas when Amma offers what appears to be the same thing, no one can resist? The difference is in the quality of what is being offered. Of course, Amma's hug is not just a hug. As she says, "When Amma embraces someone, it is not just physical contact that is taking place. The love Amma feels for

all of creation flows toward each person who comes to her. Thar pure vibration of love purifies people, and this helps them in their inner awakening and spiritual growth."

Recently, during a very crowded darshan day, a little girl who was meeting Amma for the first time came up to Amma from the side with a piece of paper in her hands. She desperately wanted to show Amma her drawing, but Amma was giving darshan so fast that it seemed she would never have time to even glance at the girl's drawing. Just then, amidst the flurry of all that activity, Amma looked over at the little girl out of the corner of her eye.

In her next free moment, Amma turned to the girl and said, "Oh, please show me your drawing!" The little girl was in heaven. She displayed her masterpiece for Amma who appeared greatly impressed. Meanwhile, the rest of us standing near Amma were still struggling to determine what the subject matter of the drawing was in the first place. It was dearly an abstract composition of sorts, looking something like an elephant seal wearing snowshoes.

After praising the girl's efforts, Amma began to teach her how to draw. She took a piece of paper and, placing it on the back of the devotee in her lap at that time, drew a picture of a flower and said, "See, this is how you draw a flower. Now you do it." The little girl immediately immersed herself in the task, and quickly produced her own rendering of the flower. "Oh, pray good," Amma said affec-

tionately. Then, as if Amma had all the time in the world, she taught her how to draw another flower, then a tree, then a bird, and so many other things—all in the midst of giving darshan. She showered so much love and affection on this little girl. Later on, we were told that this girl had dyslexia and was struggling to learn at school. Clearly, Amma already knew this. The interaction apparently had a profound impact on the little girl. Since that interaction, she no longer struggles with her learning disability at school and can study with the other children. Just from this one interaction with Amma, this little girl was able to see the world in an entirely new light.

Another such example is the story of a devotee from Seattle. When he was going to attend Amma's program for the first time, he took the bus from another part of town. The man had multiple sclerosis and always got around with the help of a cane. At the time of his first visit with Amma, he was also unemployed and living cither on the streets or in low-income housing, as he had only his disability pension for income. His poverty wasn't just a material poverty but a poverty of confidence; he was haunted by a feeling of hopelessness and was totally resigned to his circumstances. On that first night with Amma, he stayed for Amma's talk and devotional songs and then left happy for the experience, even without receiving Amma's darshan.

On the way home, since the bus was not scheduled to come any time soon and he was so full of energy, he decided just to walk to the next bus stop. After stopping briefly, he thought, "Oh, there is still some more time. Why not walk just one more stop?" Like this, he managed to beat the bus home.

One might chalk it up to just an adrenaline rush, but he did not lose his momentum that night. Soon after this, the man gradually gave up his cane, for his MS never again bothered him as much as it had before. But his rapidly improving health was only one small pan of the transformation that unfolded after his meeting with Amma. Within a couple of months of first seeing Amma, he was inspired to apply for a job at the housing project where he lived. He became a case manager, helping the people in that community. A few months after taking that job he became the centers director. Two years down the road would sec him take over as the Executive Director of the Operational Emergency Center, one of the biggest food banks in Seattle. And a few years after that, he graduated to working for the city of Seattle where he is now the director of the city's Homelessness Intervention and Block Grant Administration. In his office on the 6O'h floor overlooking the city, he has a picture of Amma and a copy of one of Amma's speeches for all to read. Amma didn't even physically touch him on

that first visit, but just look at the complete transformation that being in Amma's presence brought about in his life. Amma has so much faith in us that we have no choice but to believe in ourselves.

Once, a brahmachari was traveling by bus to conduct a program. The man sitting next to him asked him which Ashram he belonged to and where he was going. I he brahmachari spoke kindly to him. Before the man got off the bus, he gave his phone number to the brahmachari and asked him to visit his house the next time he passed through the city.

Some months later, this brahmachari was passing through the same city. Suddenly he remembered the man and felt a strong urge to call him. The man answered the brahmachari s call and invited him to get off the bus and he would pick him up. The brahmachari got down at the next stop and before long he was riding in a car with the man. As soon as they started driving, the brahmachari realized the man was fully drunk. The brahmachari was shocked. But before he knew it, the car stopped in front of the man's house. Getting out of the car, the man opened the door for the brahmachari and invited him inside.

At the doorstep, he was greeted by the man's wife and mother. They were both in tears. The man's wife told the brahmachari that just a few moments before, the man had been quarrelling with his mother. When the wife had tried

to intervene, he had picked up a kitchen knife and was just about to lunge for her when the mans mobile phone rang. Hearing the brahmachari's voice, the man suddenly came to his senses, put down the knife and left to pick up the brahmachari. If the call had come a moment later, the man could have killed her.

After the brahmachari's visit to the house, the man's character was completely reformed. He brought his mother and wife to see Amma and confessed all his wrongdoings. Amma advised him, "Don't waste your life, son." The man took her words to heart. Since that day, he has not touched alcohol and has been faithfully caring for his wife and mother.

Amma's love can reach even into the darkest and most forgotten corners of the human heart. Even convicts, hearing of Amma and her unconditional love, are reformed.

One such young man recounts how he had joined a gang, used and sold drugs, and even been shot by a rival gang member before first seeing Amma's picture in a magazine and deciding to attend her program. He spent the entire night watching Amma, but he did not go for darshan himself. Still, he was transfixed by Amma's selfless, unconditional love, and he felt uplifted and inspired by her words on a life dedicated to serving humanity.

Even so, his past continued to haunt him, and he was unable to completely overcome his addictions. He ended

up homeless and living on the street. Knowing a life of love and service was possible but feeling unable to adhere to it, he even felt it would be better to die. It was then that he was arrested and imprisoned. After a few weeks in prison, he suddenly began thinking about Amma and remembered how he had felt in her presence—that despite his past and all of his crimes, she would always love him as her very own darling son. The next thing he knew, he began shedding tears of joy. Though he was imprisoned, for the first time in his life, he felt like a free man.

After that, he told more than 70 of his fellow inmates about the fullness of love he had found in Amma's presence. He wrote to Amma's California ashram and received a package of Amma's books and photos along with words of encouragement from some of the ashram residents. He read and passed around the books and displayed the photos in his cell.

Soon after, he was inspired to create a Thanksgiving dinner for the inmates as a service to those around him. Afterwards, one of the correctional officers told him that they had never seen anything like that in prison, and a few inmates told him that for that one day, they were able to forget they were in prison.

After a short rime, the man was released and now spends his time reaching out to others who feel they are beyond hope and help. Through Amma's American non-

profit organization, he has helped initiate a prison outreach program to bring Amma's message to prisoners across the country, making her books available to prisoners and also participating in a letter-writing program to help prisoners stay in touch with loving devotees. And each year, he brings groups of homeless and recovering drug addicts to Amma's darshan, where they receive a hot meal as well as her transformative embrace.

In the *Guru Gita,* it is said,

> *ajnana timrrandhasya jhananjana salakaya*
> *caksurun militam yena tasmai sri gurave namah*
>
> Salutations to the guru, who opened the eyes of the
> one blinded by the cataract of ignorance
> with the needle coated with the ointment of
> knowledge.

the words of a true master hold a special power to open our eyes to our own potential. The story of another prisoner helps to illustrate this point. After being arrested in 1996 and sentenced to 10 years in prison, his criminal behaviors only worsened. Eventually he assaulted a prison guard and was sentenced to an additional three years in solitary confinement. During that time he was only allowed to come out for one hour each day. After three months in isolation, he looked around at his surroundings and asked himself, "How did I end up like this?" He realized that he needed to change, but he didn't know how. The very next

day, a prison guard came around with a book cart on wheels and asked the prisoner if he would like something to read. He looked down and saw one of Amma's books there. He was immediately drawn to her picture and took the book. Reading Amma's words about the unstable nature of the mind and how human beings tend to make poor decisions when in a deeply emotional state, the prisoner realized that Amma was perfectly describing his life up to that point. He followed Amma's instructions for basic meditation and as a result was slowly able to become more aware of his emotions and to make better decisions. Finally, he found that he no longer said or did negative things while angry and was able to make a conscious decision not to do something that he would later regret.

He says that this was the first step for him in learning to have some measure of control over behaviors that he had previously thought were just pan of his personality. Today, he is in college—a straight-A student in physics and engineering. He attributes everything he has achieved to Amma and her divine wisdom and love.

In India as well, Amma has been able to rescue lost souls and transform even the hardest of hearts. I recall the story of a man who became a devotee later in life. To say that he had a checkered past is an understatement. As a boy, he was often bullied at school. One day, he fought back with a vengeance and found that he had earned the respect of

even the toughest and meanest of the kids and the fear of everyone else. After that, no one dared taunt him or touch him. That day, he learned that his capacity for violence meant security and power. He carried that lesson with him, and as a young man he became a thug-for-hire, working as a collector for money-lenders. This went on to such an extent that his name literally struck fear into the hearts of his employers beleaguered debtors.

And then one day, his wife went to see Amma. Touched by Amma's life, message and loving demeanor, she became a devotee and would visit the ashram as often as she could. She also brought photos of Amma home with her and placed them in their household's puja room. As she grew closer to Amma, her husband's heavy drinking and hard living began to bother her more and more. She often invited him to come see Amma, but he never showed any interest. However, he did not want her to be unhappy, and when she finally asked him to swear on Amma's photo that he would give up his drinking and life of crime, he did so without hesitation. However, his only intention had been to appease his wife, not to actually effect any change in his lifestyle. And so he continued as usual. But the next time his wife invited him to come see Amma, for one reason or another, he accepted.

It was the first time his wife was seeing Amma since exacting the promise from her husband, and she had not

had a chance to cell Amma about it. But the moment her husband knelt in front of Amma, she gently reprimanded him, “Hey, my son, how dare you break a promise?" Though spoken almost casually, these words struck the man like a thunderbolt—Amma knew about his promise; therefore she knew about everything he had said and done. Yet she saw enough good left in him to embrace him and speak to him affectionately as her own darling son. From that moment on, the man did make good on his promise, and since then has become one of Amma’s most ardent devotees in his area. Not only that, he has taken Amma’s message to heart and donates a part of his salary—from his new, legal line of work—to purchase books and uniforms for poor students.

Amma says, “Even a broken watch tells the correct time twice a day.” With this relentlessly generous, infinitely patient outlook, she repairs broken human beings and, making them whole, offers them back to the world as prasad. Blowing on the last remaining spark of goodness in the blackest of hearts, she can create a bonfire of love, compassion and dedication to acts of kindness both random and planned.

It is through her love that Amma is changing the way so many people all around the world sec themselves, their potential, their communities, and their world. And it’s not just limited to those Amma physically embraces. Many people around the world can’t afford to come sec Amma

or do not live near any of the stops on Amma's tour, but they hear about the work she is doing and can't help but want to do their part, whatever that may be.

Amma says, "One attains completeness when knowledge and love come together. May my children's hearts also become full of true knowledge and love. In this way, may my children become the light of the entire world."

CHAPTER 13

Stepping Out of the Comfort Zone

"All that God asks you most pressingly is to go out of yourself—and let God be God in you. "

—Meisrer Eckhart

Amma tells the following story. Once, a general noticed a previously promising young captain had developed a serious drinking habit. He called the inebriated captain into his office and said, "You're a good man, but you're wasting yourself. If you can remain sober, soon you will become a colonel."

The captain laughed and replied, "Its not worth it. If I remain sober I am only going to become a colonel, and while I am drunk I am already a general!"

Amma often says, "It is easy to wake someone who is sleeping, but difficult to wake one who is pretending to be asleep." This means that we are aware, on some level, that the life we are leading and the choices we make arenot always in line with our spiritual goals.

For example, Amma often guides her children in the prayer,

"O Lord, may my every thought be of You
May my every word be a hymn sung in Your praise
May my every action be an offering at Your lotus feet
May every step I take bring me closer to You. "

It is worth examining whether our actions are really in line with this prayer. After all, there is no sense praying that our every step brings us closer to God and then getting up and running in the opposite direction.

Once, a man stood quietly at the bedside of his dying father. "Please, my boy," whispered the old man, "always remember that wealth docs not bring happiness."

"1 realize that. Dad," his son replied. "But at least it will allow me to choose the kind of misery I find most agreeable." Like this, most of us are happy to setde for the lesser of evils. We make choices that conflict with our spiritual goal because they allow us to remain comfortable. But to reach the goal of spiritual life, we either have to expand the idea of who we are until it encompasses the entire universe, or we have to forget ourselves totally. Either method requires moving beyond our comfort zone, doing things we don't like to do and learning to put the needs and desires of others before our own. Fortunately for us, Amma is an expert at taking us by the hand and ever so gently leading us out of the prison of our comfort zone, beyond the bonds of our personal likes and dislikes.

Once during one of Amma's North Indian tours, the tour group stopped by the side of the road for lunch. Amma served plates of rice, tapioca curry and sambar to everyone. After the prayer, as everyone began to cat, Amma noticed that one brahmachari sitting next to her had not started eating. Rather, he was looking a little forlornly down at his plate; he was not a big fan of tapioca. "Hey, eat something," Amma admonished him. Resigning himself to his fate, he began to reluctantly eat a few handfuls of food. Suddenly, Amma reached out and took the better part of his tapioca curry onto her own plate. Watching her eat it, the brahmachari felt terribly awkward, as according to Indian tradition it is considered disrespectful to let another person eat from ones own half-eaten plate—let alone the guru. But Amma was unfazed. When she was done eating, she announced, "I took his curry—somebody give him some more."

One of the brahmacharis serving brought him some more, and he dutifully began eating. But as he was eating, a funny thing happened. It suddenly occurred to him that Amma, having taken the curry from his plate, must like it very much. Therefore, why should he not like it? Thinking thus, he realized that he did not feel any distaste for it anymore. Later, as time went by, he found that whenever he had tapioca curry he was reminded of Amma, and little by little he acquired a liking for it. Nowadays, he even asks for a second helping whenever tapioca is served.

Likewise, most of us are not inclined toward selfless service or regular spiritual practice. But when we see Amma performing these actions with so much enthusiasm and sincerity, we cannot help but feel like following in her footsteps.

In the early stages of spiritual life, however, we can expect to come across some stumbling blocks. For example, when we begin our relationship with a spiritual master, we come with great expectations of being guided. But when the master actually starts to advise us, we sometimes find that we don't like what he or she has to say. The masters very job description is to help us go beyond our likes and dislikes. We have to bear this in mind when receiving guidance and instructions from the master. Naturally the master will say things we don't like to hear and ask us to do things we don't like to do. We need to be prepared for that and to remember that it is for our own good—it is only to help us to expand our sense of who we arc and what we are capable of.

In our first few years with Amma, we knew nothing about spirituality—we were just attracted and inspired by Amma's unconditional motherly love. Amma was very lenient with us for some time, as a mother will be with her children. But after a while, Amma announced that she would be putting some rules into place for our own spiritual growth. At the time Amma commented, "When a plant is

young, it needs to be protected. Otherwise it will be eaten by stray animals or trampled by an unobservant passer by. Later on, however, when it grows into a tree, one can even tic an elephant to it—such will be its strength. Likewise, in the initial stages a spiritual aspirant should closely adhere to the traditional disciplines of spiritual life."

One of the new rules in those days was that tea and coffee were prohibited. As Amma says, "If we cannot cross even a small stream (giving up the habit of drinking coffee), how can we expect to cross the ocean of *samsara* (the cycle of birth and death)?"

However, one of the brahmacharis was initially unable to give up his coffee habit. Secretly, he continued to make coffee and drink it in private. One day, he made a second cup for another one of the brahmacharis. The second brahmachari felt remorseful after drinking the coffee, however, and went to tell Amma of his transgression. Amma called the first brahmachari and loudly accused him of being a bad influence on the other brahmachari, who had only recently joined the Ashram. Later that day, a few of us were seated in the kitchen area when the first brahmachari burst in, looking obviously irate. "From nowonwards," he declared, "I will not share my coffee with anyone!"

Like this, when the guru says something that displeases us, we can always find a way to interpret it so that it does not indicate the need for a change in our behavior.

Amma tells the following parable to illustrate this point. A man once went in search of a master. He wanted a guru who could guide him according to his own desires. But no guru was willing to do that; nor were the rules the gurus imposed acceptable to him. In the end, the man was tired and lay down in a field to rest. He thought, “There’s no guru who can guide me the way I like. I refuse to become anyone’s slave! Whatever I choose to do, isn’t it God who is making me do it anyway?" He turned his head to the side and saw a camel standing nearby, nodding its head. “Ah, yes! There is someone who is fit to be my master!” he thought.

“O camel, will you be my master? ” he asked. The camel nodded its head.

So the man accepted the camel as his spiritual master. “O master, may I take you home?” he asked. The camel nodded again. He took the camel home and tied it to a tree.

A few days passed. "O master, there's a girl I’m in love with. May I marry her?” he asked. The camel nodded.

“O master, I have no children," he said after a while. The camel nodded again. Children were born.

"May I drink a little alcohol with my friends?" the man asked one day. The camel nodded. The fellow soon became a drunkard. He started quarrelling with his wife.

“O master, my wife is bothering me. May I beat her up?” he asked the camel. The camel nodded. He went home

and did so, and hearing the Commotion, the police came and arrested him.

Amma says, " The guru is like the doctor who will not let the snake-bite patient sleep. The onlooker may see the doctor s tactics as cruel and feel that the doctor should just let the patient get some rest. But the doctor knows that if the patient falls asleep, he may die." Likewise, Amma says, “If you find a guru who lets you do whatever you want, or if you just live as you please, you will only continue to live in bondage."

One of Amma’s devotees recently told me a story. He said that one day he was commiserating with a friend about the various disagreements arising in his local satsang group. After listening for a while, his friend, who followed a different spiritual path, interrupted. “You know, my group has the same problems," he said. “But in your case, you don’t have to worry."

“Why not?" Amma’s devotee asked.

“Because your guru is 100%. I have no doubt that she is a perfect master. So whatever happens in her satsang group will definitely lead to your spiritual growth."

“Wait a second," the devotee protested. “As I recall, the first time Amma came to our city, you came to the program, but you never came back.”

“That’s right," his friend admitted. “I walked in and saw Amma sitting there giving darshan at the front of the hall.

The moment I laid eyes on her, I could tell she was the real thing. So I turned around and walked right back out."

"Why?" the devotee asked.

"Because I knew she meant business," the friend explained. "I knew that if I stayed with Amma, sooner or later, I would have to leave my comfort zone and make real changes."

This is true for all of us. The point of coming to a true master like Amma is not simply to forget our problems or the problems of the world—for that, one can simply watch a movie or get intoxicated. What is really needed is not less awareness but more. Amma makes us more aware of our inner world and more aware of our surroundings as well. Amma says that when we are watching TV and we see people suffering in the world, our first instinct may be to change the channel. But Amma says we shouldn't try to blind ourselves to the suffering of others. There are problems in the world, and Amma wants her children to be part of the solution. That is why she encourages us to minimize our spending on luxuries and work an extra half an hour a day to raise money for the poor. That is why she says that to waste food is a form of violence. These are not easy instructions to follow, and the weakest, laziest, most selfish parts in us may feel that Amma is not being practical. But if we were to take Amma's instructions to heart, to follow

them sincerely, how much better a place would the world become? How much happier would our own lives be?

Any incident which unfolds around Amma cannot be told as just one story—in fact, there are as many stories as there are devotees present, for each one has a different experience, a different pearl they will carry with them forever. In the case of the incident of Amma preparing unniyappam on the roof of the ashram in Madurai, one brahmachari relates his story.

While Amma was pouring the dough into the boiling oil and determining whether the sweets were ready to serve, she laughed, “These are only half-cooked—like some of my children." One brahmachari seated near her thought to himself, “Yes, unlike me, many of these people here are not really ready to receive Amma’s teachings... the main thing is, they have not really surrendered to the guru.”

Shortly thereafter, Amma began distributing two unniyappams as prasad to each person there. According to tradition, it is said that a real disciple should accept whatever the guru offers as prasad. However, this brahmachari had recently been experiencing stomach pain and nausea, and the doctor had advised him not to cat any fried foods for the duration of his illness. With this in mind, he did not extend his hand to receive Amma’s prasad. Finally, asking everyone who had not received prasad to raise their hands.

Amma looked at him and asked him to translate her request into English. He did so, but even then, remembering the doctors advice, he did not raise his own hand. After Amma had given prasad to everyone, the brahmachari leaned forward and told Amma about his recent health problems. With great tenderness, Amma exclaimed, “Oh, my son, are you not well? Eat this.” So saying, and with a mischievous smile on her countenance, she gently placed two unniyappams in his hand and folded his fingers over them.

After Amma stood up and walked away, the brahmachari realized that Amma was teasing him for his reluctance to accept her prasad and also letting him know that he, too, was only half-cooked.

Like this, in our personal lives, Amma puts us in situations where we can become aware of our negativities and work to grow beyond them. However, she will not force us to do anything.

One of Amma’s brahmacharis recently shared a story with me that illustrates this point. About 18 years ago, all the ashram residents were participating in a project to reclaim a flooded area on the ashram grounds. They were carrying bags of sand from the place it had been unloaded to the flooded area. One young brahmachari who was not inclined to perform manual labor suddenly found himself thinking, "When will I be relieved? I have had to keep this up for so long.” The next time he returned to the

sand pile, the moment he stooped to throw another bag over his shoulder, suddenly Amma came running and addressed him by name. "How long have you been carrying sand, my son?"

The brahmachari replied, “Almost two hours."

Then Amma exclaimed loudly, “Two hours! Look at this boy... he has been working hard for so long." So saying she reached to take the sack of sand from his shoulders. The brahmachari refused and walked away from her, dumping the sand at its destination. But when he returned to the sand pile, Amma was waiting for him. “Go and rest, my son."

In the past, due to our unwillingness to step outside of our comfort zone, we might have made some mistakes or missed some opportunities to perform good actions, but we should not feel bad about our missteps on the path to God. No matter how dirty the water of our mind may be, it can always be purified gradually by adding the fresh water of divine thoughts and good actions. Both disease and sin are unavoidable aspects of human existence. Disease is a symptom of an unbalanced body; sin is a symptom of an unbalanced mind. Spirituality helps us restore the balance to our mind and set us back on the right path.

The way the guru selects his disciples has been compared to the tradition of using holy Ganges water for grinding sandalwood into fragrant sandal paste. The Ganges water represents the pure disciple, and the sandalwood represents

the spiritual master with the fragrance of true spirituality. Ordinary masters are like this. They select only the purest disciples with the right spiritual and moral character. But true masters like Amma. are not at all bothered by such qualifications. Even though the Ganges is within their reach, instead of taking that, they intentionally take the dirty water in the form of the unqualified disciple, and use it to make sandalwood paste. No matter how difficult a process it may be, they continue tirelessly till the end. with infinite patience and compassion.

Thus we should never give up, thinking we are hopeless. Instead, let us make use of this precious opportunity to associate with a mahatma like Amma and develop pure love for God. By emulating her example of prayer and sendee, eventually we, too, will forget our little selves and experience true, permanent happiness.

CHAPTER 14

Holding Onto the Truth

"By developing a personal relationship with a True Master, by creating an attachment to his external form, you are establishing a relationship with God, the Supreme Consciousness—your own inner Self This is not like developing attachment to an ordinary individual; it is a relationship which will help you to be detached in all circumstances. It prepares your mind to take the final leap into God-Consciousness. "

-Amma

The scriptures tell us that all goals in life can be classified in one of two categories. These are *preyas* (material prosperity) or *sreyas* (spiritual evolution). Whether it is preyas or sreyas, however, the essential factors necessary to achieve the goal are the same. These are called *iccha-sakti, jnana-sakti.* and *kriya-sakti*—the power to desire, the power to know, and the power to act.

All of us are given the power to desire anything in the world. This, in itself, is a privilege unique to human beings. An animal cannot desire for anything other than its basic needs—a monkey cannot desire to own or operate a computer. If you give a computer to a monkey, it will break it or throw it away. Whereas, human beings can desire anything in this world and beyond.

Once we have a desire, we must know the means to fulfill that desire. God has given us the thinking power and the intellectual capacity to find out the means to fulfill our desires.

However, just knowing the means to fulfill a desire alone is not enough. We need to put forth the effort accordingly. For this, God has given us the power to act; without this power we would not be able to move a muscle. Thus we are given these three types of power to accomplish our goals in our life, whether they fall into the category of preyas or sreyas.

We all have some measure of material prosperity we wish to obtain. Going to school helps us to identify our material goals in life and gain the skills we need to achieve them. However, modern education is geared entirely toward helping us obtain goals which fall under the category of preyas. But even if we earn a PhD, we cannot say that we have obtained real knowledge, which the scriptures define as elimination of the false ideas we have about our true nature and the nature of the world around us. It is this knowledge alone that will help us to obtain sreyas, or spiritual growth.

Once, a person saw what he thought was a piece of sparkling gold laying on the pavement. After picking it up, he realized it was just a candy wrapper. Seeing it for what it was, he discarded it without a second thought. Likewise.

when we attain the knowledge of what is true and what is false, we immediately discard the false and hold onto the true.

As we have not yet attained supreme knowledge, we need to hold onto someone like Amma, who is established in that knowledge. This connection will help us to eliminate our false ideas about our true nature. Amma says that if we are going to a new place, we may have a map of how to reach there, but it is best to have a native of that place to guide us as well.

For example, Edmund Hillary performed an exhaustive study of the conditions of Mount Everest before attempting to climb it. Even still, he had to ask the help of a native sherpa in order to succeed in his effort. Or consider the case of a highly skilled eye surgeon who needs to undergo an eye operation. He will not be able to perform the operation on himself; he must submit himself to the care of another doctor. Likewise, we may study the scriptures exhaustively, but that alone is not enough to realize our True Self. What is needed is absolute purity of mind, or we will never be able to see our own weaknesses and negative qualities in their entirety. For this, we need the help of a true master, who functions like a mirror in which we can clearly see our shortcomings and thereby remove them.

So what does it mean to hold onto the master? It does not mean clinging to their physical body and refusing to let

go; it means remembering the master throughout our daily life. The easiest way to do this is to cultivate a relationship with the master. Through our personal relationship with Amma, it will be easy to remember her, just as we remember our relatives and loved ones, even though they may live far away from us.

When we have been away from Amma, any one of her devotees can help us feel closer to her. One Westerner, who had been staying at Amritapuri and had to go back to his native country to take care of some family matters, told me that there was another Western devotee staying at the ashram whom he had never particularly liked and actually actively avoided at the ashram. But after he had been away from the ashram for a few months, he happened to run into that person, and he was so overjoyed to see him. He even invited him over to his house for dinner and treated him like a long-lost brother. Just seeing this person reminded him of Amma and made him feel as if she were not so far away.

Everything Amma docs is only to help us establish a close bond with her and thereby become attached to the Supreme Truth, or God. As Sri Krishna says in the *Bhagavad Gita,*

na me parthasi kartavyam trisu lokesu kimcana
nanavaptam avaptavyam varta eva ca karmam

'There is nothing in the three worlds, O Partha, that has not been done by Me;
nor anything unattained that might be attained; still I engage in action.

(3.22)

Similarly, Amma has nothing to gain personally by spending time with us or by performing any action at all. Recently, when a reporter asked Amma, "What is it about your position that brings you the most satisfaction and contentment?" she replied, "Contentment? I am always content. When you are not full, you try to take from others in order to become full. With me, it's not like that. It's always an overflowing.''

Some people think there is no point in sharing our problems and worries with Amma since she is identified with the Supreme Being and therefore knows everything and is also beyond everything. This is like a grammar school student saying, "There's no point in asking my father for help with my homework, because he has already finished studying all this stuff." If the child thinks in this way, he is losing the opportunity to avail himself of his father's help.

Even though the guru is beyond name and form, for our own spiritual growth, it is better to relate to the guru as a person while keeping in mind that their true nature is beyond. If, instead, we try to relate to Amma at the level of the absolute, the result will be misunderstanding and

confusion, because we are still at the objective level of body-consciousness.

During one of Ammas programs in India, as the darshan was just beginning, a brahmachari saw a man sobbing emotionally. He approached the man and asked him what was wrong.

The man replied. "I feel like my heart is expanding." The brahmachari realized it was a serious situation, so without making the man wait in line for darshan, he cut the cue and took him straight to Amma. The brahmachari said, "Amma, this man has a serious problem—his heart is enlarged."

Amma looked at the man quizzically and asked, "Is it true, my son?"

The man smiled through his tears and explained, "No, no—it's not my physical heart but my spiritual heart that is expanding because of your love, Amma."

Here, the man and the brahmachari were communicating at two different levels and therefore misunderstood each other. Likewise, if we try to communicate with Amma at her level, we will never succeed. In fact, at that level, no communication is needed—there is only oneness.

It is also true that while the master is beyond the objective level of reality, for those who are currently established in this reality, their presence here is extremely precious. Thus, even the disciples of the great sage Adi Shankarach-

arya, who re-established the supremacy of the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta (non-dualism) across the length and breadth of India, greatly valued the health and safety of their masters physical body.

Knowing about the sage's compassionate nature, a *kapalika* (one who engages in occult practices) once begged Shankaracharya to give his head as an offering in a particular ritual. Knowing that his True Self would not be affected by the loss of his physical body, Shankaracharya willingly consented, but he warned that his head must be taken without the knowledge of his disciples.

When the disciples had all gone to have their bath in the river, the kapalika found Shankaracharya immersed in meditation. He raised his sword to cut off the sage's head, but at that moment, one of Shankaracharya's disciples, Padmapada, came out of nowhere and overpowered and killed the kapalika. During his bath, he had intuitively felt that his master was in danger and decided to return. As Padmapada was a devotee of Lord Narasimha (incarnation of Lord Vishnu in the form of a man-lion), he was able to invoke Narasimha's power.

For Shankaracharya, who was completely beyond the body, it would have made no difference if the kapalika had killed him. But Padmapada did not think, "Oh, my guru is one with the indestructible Supreme Being, beyond the body and the mind, so there is no point in protecting his

body." Instead, out of his devotion, he did whatever he could to protect his masters body from harm and received his guru's grace as a result.

Once, the sage Narada came to see Lord Krishna. Seeing him, Krishna complained of a terrible headache and told Narada that only the dust from the feet of a real devotee could cure him. He requested Narada to find a true devotee and collect the dust from his feet. Though Narada himself was a great devotee, he thought he would be committing a great sin by applying the dust of his feet to the Lord s head. So he went in search of a willing devotee. However, whomsoever he approached was similarly unwilling to give the dust from their feet for fear of committing a terrible sacrilege. Finally, Narada returned to Krishna and confessed his failure.

Krishna told him to go and ask *gopis* (cowherd girls) of Vrindavan. Narada was doubtful but went anyway to Vrindavan. As soon as Narada mentioned the Lord's head-ache and the specified cure, the gopis forgot everything else and started brushing the sand off the soles of their bare feet into a small bag. They had no qualms whatsoever about giving the dust of their feet to the Lord. He was in pain, and all they could think of was how to help him. They did not mind incurring even the worst sin for the sake of their Lord. Instead, if they had thought, "Krishna is God; how can God have a headache?" then there would have been

no way to express their love and devotion. Even though it might be said that the gopis had a more limited perspective of Sri Krishna's true nature, it was their selfless devotion and love—arising out of this very perspective—that helped them to merge in the Lord in such a short time. If, instead, they had looked upon God as the impersonal Absolute, they would not have been able to focus so much of their attention and love on God. Thus it might have taken more lifetimes for them to reach the goal of human life.

Likewise, if we do not relate to the master at the human level and try to relate only at the level of the Absolute, it will be difficult to establish a strong bond with the master. For example, there are people who feel that Amma knows everything, so there is no point in writing letters to her or unburdening their hearts. There was one brahmachari who had kept secret a particular incident that had occurred in his life before he had joined the Ashram without telling anyone, including Amma. Occasionally he kept the incident in his mind when he went near Amma, thinking that she would certainly pick up on it. But he never verbally shared the incident with her. But the incident continued to haunt him. and finally he decided to unburden his heart with a letter to Amma. After she had read the letter, he went for Amma's darshan and asked if she was upset with him.

Amma smiled sweetly and said, "Of course not... whatever has happened in the past is a cancelled check. And

beginning a life with Amma is like getting a clean slate, or erasing all your mistakes. Just be careful not to repeat the same mistake; otherwise it will be like erasing repeatedly on the same spot on a piece of paper—finally, the paper will be torn."

The brahmachari was greatly relieved by Amma's answer. As he stood up to go, Amma commented, "Anyway, I already knew about that incident. But by your telling Amma openly, Amma is able to come closer to you. You have removed a wall between yourself and Amma."

Amma says the disciple should be like an open book in front of his master; he should not conceal anything. This is not because the master doesn't know something about us. But when we open our heart to the master, it helps us to feel that the master is our very own. As long as we remain at the level of duality, it is very important to nurture a close relationship with the master. Amma says, "Use me as a ladder for your spiritual growth." It is only for this—to elevate our consciousness to the level of the Absolute—that Amma has come down to our level in the first place.

For even though Amma sees the inherent unity in all of creation, she still relates to her children very much as individuals—for, after all, that is how we see ourselves. In fact, many see Amma as their lifelong confidant and friend. She laughs when we laugh, she cries when we cry, she misses us when we are gone.

The day before Amma's 2007 American Tour began, Amma went to a devotee's house located just north of Seattle. A number of devotees had gathered there to welcome Amma to the United States for her 21st annual summer tour. Amma quickly made her way to the center of the gathering, inquiring about the devotees' well-being and all the latest developments in their lives.

A few weeks before Amma's arrival, an American devotee who had been very close to Amma since meeting her in 1987 had passed away. The lack of his presence at the gathering was felt by everyone. After sitting on a chair in front of all the devotees, Amma asked everyone to take a moment of silence and to pray for the peace of his soul. She also asked everyone present to think of all the devotees who could not be there, for whatever reason.

A meal had been prepared, and Amma soon began to pass out plates of food to everyone as prasad. As she did so, Amma's gaze scanned the crowd, continuing to take in the faces of her children, many of whom she hadn't seen for the better part of a year. At this point, a girl standing near Amma noticed that Amma was wearing a jade ring on her right hand. As it is not Amma's habit to wear such jewelry, the girl asked Amma why she was wearing the ring. Amma said that during the final program in Japan, a devotee had given her the ring, and that due to the deep love with which she had given the ring, Amma had felt drawn to

put it on and to continue to wear it for some time. Amma then said that, in fact, the face of the girl whod given her the ring had reminded her of the wife of the devotee who had recently passed away.

Amma explained that for her it is often like this. Wherever she goes, the faces of the people to whom she gives darshan remind her of the faces of other devotees—often ones living on the other side of the world. Voices too, Amma said; the way a certain person speaks often will make her think of someone else in a country far, far away. In this way, Amma said that she is always thinking about her children all around the world—even if they are not able to be physically with her.

CHAPTER 15

Observer and the Observed

"We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time. "

-T.S. Eliot

Once, a general decided to attack even though his army was greatly outnumbered. He was confident of victory, but his men were filled with doubt.

On the way to the battle, the general took out a coin and said, "I shall now toss this coin. If it is heads, we shall win. If it is tails, we shall lose—destiny will now reveal itself."

He threw the coin into the air and all watched intently as it landed. It was heads. The soldiers were so overjoyed and filled with confidence that they vigorously attacked the enemy and were victorious.

After the battle, a lieutenant remarked to the general, "No one can change destiny."

"Quite so," the general replied as he showed the lieutenant the coin—which had heads on both sides.

The generals trick had added neither arms nor men to his army; it had merely given his men the confidence

they needed to persevere. He changed the way they saw themselves and their chances; they won the battle because they believed they could.

Likewise. Amma says, "We see in the world that which we project. If we look with eyes of hatred and vengeance, the world will appear exactly that way to us. But if we look with eyes of love and compassion, we will see nothing but God's beauty everywhere."

There is a Japanese folktale that illustrates this point. Long ago in a small, far away village, there was place known as the House of 1,000 Mirrors. A small, happy little dog learned of this place and decided to visit. When he arrived, he bounded happily up the stairs to the doorway of the house. He looked through the doorway with his cars lifted high and his tail wagging as fast as it could. To his great surprise, he found himself staring at 1,000 other happy little dogs with their tails wagging just as fast as his. He smiled broadly, and was answered with 1,000 equally warm and friendly smiles. As he left the house, he thought to himself, "This is a wonderful place. I will come back and visit it often."

In this same village, another little dog, who was not quite as happy as the first one, decided to visit the house as well. He slowly climbed the stairs and hung his head low as he looked into the door. When he saw the 1,000 unfriendly looking dogs staring back at him, he growled

at them and was horrified to sec 1,000 little dogs growling back in return. As he left, he thought to himself, “What a horrible place—I will never return there."

Amma recounts an experiment conducted to ascertain whether or not this world really is as we perceive it. The researchers gave a young man a pair of glasses that distoned his vision. They then instructed him to wear the glasses continuously for seven days. For the first three days, he was very restless, as his perception of everything was quite disturbing. But after that, his eyes became hilly adjusted to the glasses, and the pain and discomfort completely disappeared. What had at first made the world seem strange and distorted, later seemed normal to him. “In the same way," Amma says, “each of us is wearing a different type of glasses. It is through these glasses that we view the world.”

One day a wealthy man took his son on a trip to the country with the firm purpose of showing him just how poor people can be.

They spent a day and a night in the farm of a very poor family. When they got back from their trip the father asked his son, “How was the trip?"

“Very good. Dad,” his son replied enthusiastically.

“And what did you learn?" his father inquired expectantly.

The son answered, “I saw that we have a dog at home, and they have four. We have a pool that reaches to the

middle of the garden; they have a creek that has no end. We have lamps in the garden, they have the stars. Our patio reaches to the front yard, they have a whole horizon." The boy's father was speechless, but he was not finished. He concluded cheerfully, "Thanks, Dad, for showing me how poor we are."

Though the boy and his father shared the same genes and lived in the same house, went on a trip together and saw all the same things, they came to entirely different conclusions.

Of course, there are some things about objective reality we can all agree on. If it is raining cats and dogs, no one will comment on what a sunny day it is. But even if we were all able to acquire the exact same mindset and share the same opinion about what we are looking at, modem physicists have discovered that it is not possible for human beings to have a truly objective view. For example, according to Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, it is not possible to simultaneously know both where a sub-atomic particle is and in what direction it is going. This is because when one wants to observe the position of any given sub-atomic particle, one has to bounce another particle off of it—in most cases, a photon (particle of light). However, the collision of the photon with the particle under observation disturbs the observed particle's trajectory, just as one billiard ball

striking another will alter its path. Thus, by the very act of observation, the observer changes the observed reality.

Leaving quantum mechanics aside, our ability to create an accurate picture of the world is severely limited. For example, human beings have always assumed that our ability to chart the world around us is limited only by our patience and ingenuity. But with improved technology, we are now aware that the universe is far vaster than we can ever begin to fathom. We have begun to understand the limitations of our instruments of perception. However it is not only the limitations of our senses and our technologies that inhibit our accurate perception; at least as obstructive are our pre-existing ideas and concepts. In effect, all of us are psychologically disabled in one way or another. In some ways, this is even more crippling than a physical disability. With a physical disability, we are clearly aware of our limitations. When we are convinced that our mind and mindset are perfect and are unaware of our psychological disability, we will not realize our limitations. When we find ourselves in difficult circumstances that are in fact of our own making, we will wonder how it happened.

Once, there was a final examination for a university course with more than 700 students in the class. The professor was strict about the exams time limit, telling the class that any booklets that were not on his desk in exactly two hours would not be accepted and the student would fail.

Half an hour into the exam, a student sauntered in and calmly asked the professor for an exam Booklet. “You’re not going to have time to finish this," the professor stated sarcastically as he handed the student a booklet.

“Yes I will,” replied the student confidently. Taking a seat, he began writing the exam with careful deliberation.

After two hours, the professor called for the exam booklets, and the students obediently filed up and handed them in; all except the late student, who continued writing. Thirty minutes later, the late student came up to the professor and attempted to put his exam on the stack of exam booklets already on the desk. “Not so fast,” the professor stopped him. “I’m not going to accept that. It’s late.”

Adopting an outraged expression, the student demanded, “Don’t you know who I am?”

“No, as a matter of fact I don't," the professor acknowledged blithely. “And to be honest, I couldn’t care less."

“Good," replied the student, and lifting the stack of completed exams, quickly stuffed his in the middle and walked out of the room.

The professor did not realize until too late that he did not have enough information about the student he was confronting. Because he did not have an accurate picture of the world around him, he was unable to respond in the appropriate way.

Likewise, most of us accept at face value the world in which we exist. We are bent on attaining success and prosperity, and we never stop to think whether it is all worthwhile or if there is a greater meaning to life.

There are, of course, exceptions to the rule. There is the famous case of the protagonist of the existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartres novel *Nausea* who becomes overwhelmed with shock and horror at the thought of how many times he is going to have to put on his pants for the rest of his life. The same character is similarly disgusted and overcome with revulsion by the most mundane facts of his existence and the objects in the world around him. At one point, he comments to a friend, “Here we sit, all of us, eating and drinking to preserve our precious existence and really there is nothing, nothing, absolutely no reason for existing.” The existentialists saw, correctly, that we are trapped in a world of forms—chasing forms, ingesting forms and commenting on the behavior and attributes of other forms, until our own form crumbles and passes away.

With this insight, they thought that they could see what everyone else was missing. But they, too, were missing something—there is a divine, transcendent reality that, with sincere effort and Gods grace, can become our personal experience. Like someone counting the members of a group and forgetting to count himself, the existentialist

did not look beyond the mind to discover the Atma. For these philosophers, as for most people, it was as though the mind were the ultimate subject—life on earth was sensory stimuli as experienced by the mind, through the senses.

It is true that with respect to the external world, the mind functions as a subject. In the ultimate sense, however, according to Vedanta, the mind is also an object because we are aware of the condition of our mind—sad, happy, confused, clear, etc.—and whatever we are aware of is an object. Vedanta say's that the mind is illumined by the Atma, but the senses and the world are illumined by the mind, in the same way that the light of the Sun can be reflected in a mirror to illumine a second object.[10]

Seeing the limitations of the external world, but seeing nothing beyond it, the existentialists were overcome with desperation, sorrow and even nausea. Theirs was a negative negation of the world.

The ancient rishis also declared *"Neti, neti,* ''(Not this, not this)—they also negated the world as *mithya* (ever-changing, and therefore illusory in the ultimate sense of the word). But theirs was a positive negation. Everything that is changing causes pain and unhappiness, they declared. But

*** ° In his *Drg Drisya Viveka.* Shankaracharya explains it thus: "The form is perceived and the eye is the perceiver. The eye is perceived and the mind is its pcrceiver. The mind with its modifications is perceived and the witness is verily the perceiver. But the witness is not perccised by any other."**

there is one thing that never changes, that is the Atma, or the witness consciousness. Only by identifying with That can we be truly happy and peaceful, remaining unaffected by the vagaries of existence.

In the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad,* Yajnavalkya tells Ushasta, “The inner essence of the whole universe is the essence of you as well." In order to discover our inner essence, we need not go anywhere. If a wave on the surface of the Arabian Sea wants to know its true essence, it need not travel to the Adan tic Ocean. It is enough to go beneath the surface and it will find that it is essentially water.

Two people were standing on opposite banks of a rushing river. One called out to the other, “How do I get to the other side?"

The person on the opposite bank responded, “What do you mean? You’re already on the other side!”

Like this. Self-realization is not a journey to be undertaken; we just have to realize that we already are that for which we have been searching. The existentialists saw part of the picture; the quantum physicists see another part. Quantum theorists have postulated that there is a vast ocean of hid- den energy on which the physical world is just a ripple. It underpins and gives rise to physical reality. These scientists predicted that it is energetically enormously dense—so dense that we should be crushed by it, but it is frictionless and

so neither we nor our instruments register it. We move in it like a fish in water and owe our existence to it.

This may be as close to an accurate description of Brahman as has ever been proposed by modern science. But the scientists, too, have only part of the picture—they suspect the existence of Brahman, but it has never occurred to them that this is their own True Self. Only the rishis obtained a holistic view, incorporating the limitations of the external world, the absolute reality of Brahman, and the nature of our True Self as that very same Brahman.

Scientifically minded people always pride themselves on being realistic. But in fact, the only truly realistic people are Self-realized masters like Amma, who are able to see reality as it is. As it is said in the *Mundaka Upanishad,* "One who knows Brahman (the omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent Pure Consciousness) becomes Brahman."

This is the difference between academic knowledge and spiritual knowledge. When we have learned everything there is to know about a frog, we don't become a frog—fairy tales notwithstanding. But when we have truly understood the nature of Brahman, we "become" Brahman. As Amma says about the realized person, "Rather than talking about sugar, or tasting a bit of sugar, he or she becomes sugar—sweetness itself." The separation between the observer and the observed dissolves completely; they become one and the same.

Thus, it is only when we realize our true nature as the consciousness pervading all of creation that we are truly able to see clearly. Until then, we are as if looking through a besmirched, fogged-over window.

Just as our vision of reality is necessarily limited by our instruments of perception and colored by our own mindset, we have a similarly limited view of the nature of a true masters words and actions. Once again, the limitations of the observer obstruct the correct perception of the observed. To the extent that we are able to overcome these limitations by purifying our mind through contemplation and spiritual practices, we will be able to perceive more clearly the guru's genuine intentions.

Amma's style of teaching, of imparting knowledge, is very subde. There are no big declarations, no pomp or pretentions. It is all very natural, spontaneous and humble. On the surface, some of Amma's actions may seem insignificant, so we may undervalue them and take them for granted. But in fact, there is a teaching in every moment, in every word, in every action. We just need a discriminating eye and the proper awareness to catch the teaching.

For example, recently Amma has been talking about the increasing pollution and environmental problems around the world. One of the possible solutions she mentioned is to recycle plastic, which is not biodegradable and will remain in landfills for thousands of years. One ashram resident took

Amma's suggestion to heart and began pondering ways to recycle soft plastic, which is generally considered useless and either burned or sent to the landfill. Suddenly one day it occurred to her that it might be possible to weave the plastic into something useful. After a great deal of experimentation, she has begun weaving beautiful carry bags and rope sandals made out of old plastic bags. When Amma was shown samples of these products, her eyes lit up like those of a proud mother, and she told others how happy she was that her children are showing such thoughtfulness and ingenuity. "Amma is very pleased by these children's efforts to create wealth from waste," Amma said at the time. "You may think it is only a small gesture, but through this the beans of individuals blossom and then others are inspired to follow. This can lead to significant changes in society."

Though thousands of people had heard Amma's comment that it would be good to recycle plastic, for most of them, it did not sink in. However, one person had the subtlety of mind to really absorb it and translate it into productive action.

With our limited perspective, we often miss the purpose behind Amma's actions as well. In advance of the 2007 Onam holiday, women belonging to some of the self-help cooperatives initiated by Amma wanted to hold a festive program at Amritapuri. The program included a competition for the best *pookalam* (traditional floral designs),

traditional folk songs, musical chairs and a tug-of-war. The program was slated to be held in the larger of the two halls at the ashram, while Amma's darshan was scheduled for the smaller hall, as is typical for a weekday.

Just half an hour before the program began, Amma suddenly announced that she was going to give darshan in the larger hall. This caught the organizers of the Onam celebration off-guard, as they had already cleared the hall and arranged for the events to be held there. Now that Amma's darshan would be there, they had no idea what would happen to the Onam program. Some of the participants, hearing the news, were disappointed thinking that their program would be disturbed or even cancelled.

But when Amma came to the stage, she immediately began giving directions about how to arrange the chairs so that the maximum number of people would be able to watch rhe program. She also invited all of the ashram residents, visitors, and even the students to attend the program. Later, when she noticed that the organizers were planning to designate distinguished guests from other parts of India and abroad as the program judges, she remarked that it would be better if the program judges be restricted to people of Kerala, as they would be able to fully appreciate the traditional art forms and the Onam celebrations. All this feedback and direction was given in the midst of giving darshan.

The ladies arranging the flowers had never dreamed that Amma would come to see all of their arrangements. But the pookalams were arranged down the center of the hall so that Amma could have a clear view of them from her vantage point on the stage. All of the other aspects of the program were also arranged so that Amma as well as everyone else could see. The program participants' hearts leapt with joy at the chance to perform for Amma.

Finally, after the names of the winners of the pookalam competition were announced, Amma said over the loudspeakers, "Those who did not win a prize should not lose heart. You have all done your work with a devotional attitude while chanting your mantras, and God has accepted all of your offerings."

The program participants and even some of the organizers thought Amma's last-minute decision would spoil the day's program—they could not see the bigger picture. In fact, if Amma had given darshan in the other hall, their program would have been watched by only a couple hundred friends and family members. Instead, there were thousands of onlookers from all over the world, and Amma herself attended the program. If Amma had not gone to the larger hall for darshan, the Onam program would have been nothing more than a formal function. But with her presence, it became a true celebration, and all the program participants returned home with contented hearts.

Some years ago, one of Amma's devotees, who often travels with her, sang a devotional song during the program as Amma was giving darshan. It was the first time he had sung for Amma. His voice was quite off-key and his rhythm was also less than perfect. That evening after Amma's darshan was over, he was walking along with Amma back to her room. Being quite familiar with him, the other members of the tour staff were good-naturedly teasing him for his slightly awkward performance—each person was pointing out a different mistake. Suddenly Amma turned and commented, "Even if none of you liked it, God has accepted his song." Hearing this, everyone kept quiet.

Whereas the other people listening to the devotee's song could only hear the mistakes at the superficial level, Amma could hear the innocence within the devotee's heart. Amma says it is this very innocence that many of us are most lacking: "When we see a rainbow, or the waves of the ocean, do we still feel the innocent joy of a child? An adult who experiences a rainbow as being nothing but light waves will not know the joy and wonder of a child who sees a rainbow or a child who is watching the waves of the ocean."

Last year, at the end of Amma's three-day programs in Munich, after the Devi Bhava darshan had come to a close, Amma made her way through the throng of her children, only to find that a cluster of heart-shaped balloons that had been used to decorate the venue were waiting for her near the car—each one clutched in the hand of a man.

woman or child waiting for one last glimpse of their beloved mother.

Though Amma had been giving darshan continuously for a long time, she stopped outside the car, apparently delighted at the sight of the heart-shaped balloons. The balloons were filled with helium, and one devotee demonstrated to Amma that if one were to let it go, it would fly—not 10 or 20 feet but far up into the sky, well above the treetops and the tallest buildings of the city. At the sight of this phenomenon, Amma became like a little child, clapping her hands and shouting with playful delight.

She proceeded to take the helium-filled hearts from the devotees who stood around her and then, one by one, and then in groups of two, three, five and 10 to let them fly up into the sky. For those standing around her, seeing the flock of hearts like birds sailing up into the sky was a wonderful sight, but far more wonderful was the sight of Amma's response—her wholehearted involvement in this spectacle. Amma says, "The childlike innocence deep within you is God." For Amma, everything is new, and the wonder of God's creation can be found even in small things.

Amma appeared completely caught up in the sight of the bright red hearts against the brilliant blue sky. Her neck bent backwards, she watched them for a long time.

As the devotees slowly dispersed, one last heart-shaped balloon, which had not had enough helium to float away,

remained on the ground. On it was Printed the German words: *"Moegen cure herzen erbluehen."*—May your hearts blossom. The last balloon remained behind as if to leave the devotees with a message: When our heart blossoms with the *innocence* of a Child, we Can verily soar to the heights of Self-realization.

CHAPTER 16

How Amma Sees the World

"Ifyou ask, "Who is God?" then, you are my God. The wind, the sea, the roaring of a lion, the cooing of the cuckoo—everything is God to me."

—Amma

Although we may have read many stories about the spiritual masters, the question may arise, what does such a master look like in real life? Will we know one if we him? How will we recognize him, and how can we be sure?

This very same question was Put to Sri Krishna by Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita.*

sthiraprajnasya ka Bhasa samadhisthasya *kesava*
sthitadhih kim prabhaseta kim asita vrajeta kim

What, O Lord, is the description of one of steadfast wisdom, steeped in samadhi? How does one who is firm in wisdom speak, how does he sit, and how docs he walk?

(2.54)

Arjuna, too, is hoping for a physical description of the true master. But Sri Krishna makes it clear that it is not the physical appearance that counts—there is no spiritual

birthmark Rather, it is by the masters behavior that we can recognize him. In the following verses, Sri Krishna elucidates the major characteristics of the *jnani,* or one who is established in the Self. The jnani, Sri Krishna explains, is utterly self-sufficient—satisfied in the Self by the Self—and therefore casts off all desires and attachments. Being free of desire, fear and anger, he is not distressed in calamity. And finally he is neither delighted in good fortune nor dejected in misfortune. Those who know Amma know that this statement perfectly describes her.

Now that we have dear picture of the true master, it is worth asking why the true master is the way he is. It is not because he has some object in his possession which we do not have. Nor does he exist in a different realm than we exist. Rather than *hmui* master looks, it is the *way* he looks at the world that makes all the difference.

Finally, Sri Krishna says,

yā niśā sarvabhūtānām tasyām jāgarti saṁyamī
yasyām jāgrati bhūtāni sā niśā paśyato muneḥ

That which is night to all beings is day to the jnani,
Thar which is day to all beings is night to the jnani.

(2.69)

This does not mean that the true master stays up all night, although in Amma's case that is certainly true. Here, Sri Krishna is using night as an analogy for duality, and

day as an analogy for non-duality. So what is unreal for all beings—non-duality—is real for the jnani, and what is real for all beings—the world of duality—is unreal for the jnani. Where we see a world of differences and division, the true master sees only Brahman, the indivisible substratum of all of creation.

Just imagine: its extremely hot. You've been working in your office without a fan or an air conditioner for eight hours straight, and it's obvious you won't even be able to get up from your desk for eight more. You haven't slept in 30 hours, and even then it was only for an hour and a half. You also haven't eaten all day. And again, the last time you did eat, it was only a few spoonfills. As part of your "job," everyone is constantly telling you all their problems, and they expect you to solve them. And you know that tomorrow is going to be the same thing, and the next day and the next day, for the rest of your life. But the smile never leaves your face. Everyone you speak to, you do so with the same love and attention as if you were speaking to your own child. You radiate peace, love, happiness and beauty.

This is a picture of a day in the life of Amma. When journalists ask her, "What's your secret? How are you able to keep this up day after day, without ever getting tired?'' she always replies. "I am not like a battery that will lose its charge after being used for some time. Rather, I am connected to the eternal source of power."

"Ok," the standard line of questioning goes. “I can understand that. But then—why would you *want* to do all this? If I were all-powerful, I can think of things I would rather do than listen to peoples problems all day long. Don’t you get bored?”

“For a babysitter,” Amma explains, “taking care of children is a burden. But for a mother, it does not become tiresome or boring."

Advaita Vedanta, the highest spiritual philosophy of India, teaches that in the ultimate sense, this world is not real. And from her pinnacle of realization, a mahatma like Amma could choose to look at it that way, to look at all the happenings of this world as a mere mirage. And when it comes to herself—to her needs for food, to her needs for rest, to physical pain that Amma may be experiencing—that is exactly how Amma sees it: not real, a mere illusion. But when it comes to the pain of her children, to our sufferings, to our needs, Amma all but throws out this philosophy and comes down to our level to hold us, to wipe our tears, to offer us whatever we need in terms of love and compassion.

Even though Amma is established in the absolute reality, she does not simply dismiss our needs and heartfelt desires, saying it s all an illusion. Amma says, “When someone comes to us with a terrible headache, what is the use of our telling

them. ‘You are not the body, mind or intellect—you are beyond all this.’? How is it going to help them? We have to do whatever we can to ease their pain or get them to a doctor.” Likewise, when people come to Amma to share their problems, Amma does whatever she can to provide them with solutions. Everyone of her humanitarian projects has been a response to the cries of her children. And she is not satisfied with just giving people what they ask for. For example, after the tsunami, the villagers of the coastal area came to Amma seeking food and shelter. Amma not only gave this, but went beyond to help the villagers become self-sufficient. After suffering such a terrible disaster, they never dreamed of financial independence. In the end, Amma has helped to transform the entire village economy, and most people are better off than they were before the disaster.

During her 2004 North India Tour, Amma held a one-night program in a city in northwestern India. As is typical, Amma arrived around sunset and continued giving darshan through the night, finishing sometime after sunrise. Very few of the people there had met Amma before and so you could not call them devotees as such. Even the person whose house Amma stayed at had not previously met Amma. About 50 of the hosts friends came over to have an unannounced, private darshan before Amma went to the program site. Amma was in a room on the second

floor, and these people occupied the staircase in order to assure that she did not leave without blessing them.

As time went on, they began getting a little agitated. They didn't like waiting so long. They thought Amma was going to try to sneak out somehow without seeing them. They started to make themselves clear One way or another, they were going to have Amma's darshan.

When word came that Amma was going to come out, they refused to even make space for her to walk down the stairs. No one could get them to move even an inch. The swamis were really afraid that Amma could get hurt when she came through the unruly crowd.

When Amma did emerge from her room, the people went wild. The scene was pure chaos; everyone pushed toward Amma at once. But the smile never left her free. She didn't shy away from anyone. She moved into their midst, literally pulling the people into her arms as she moved forward.

Ten minutes later she was in the car, riding toward the program hall where she would give darshan to thousands throughout the night. Of course she hadn't been hurt.

As Amma's car headed down the road, someone mentioned the unrefined way in which the people had acted. The swamis and people traveling with Amma were really upset. They couldn't believe the ego and ugliness they had

witnessed, the peoples impatience, and their actions falling just short of physical violence.

What was Amma’s comment? How had she perceived it?

“Love." From the back seat of the car, this was Amma’s one-word commentary on what she had observed. We see a riot. Amma secs Love and Love alone.

When we look ar the way Amma lives her life, it becomes obvious that she sees more than rhe rest of us see, in every situation and every field of life.

Later on that same tour, in Jaipur, a city in the northern Indian state of Rajasthan, Amma visited the governors home. Inspired by Amma’s example, the governor was giving financial aid every week to Rajasthan's poor and abused. He invited Amma to his mansion so that she could shower her love upon the people who gather there each week in hopes of receiving financial assistance from his fund.

Among the many people there to whom Amma gave darshan was a seven-year-old boy whose body had caught fire when someone burned his parent’s hut in a property dispute. He no longer had eyes, nor ears—just a button-sized hole where his nose had been. Seeing such a child brought tears to everyone’s eyes—bur to embrace him? To kiss his melted cheek as if it were the softest flower? It is something that only a mahatma like Amma, one who sees all as her own Self, could do. Only when we see and love

all as our own Self can we live in a world without repulsion or aversion.

In the *Purusha Suktam,* it is said,

sahasra sirsa purusah
sahasra-aksah sahasrapat
Thousands of heads has the Cosmic Person.
Thousands of eyes has he, and thousands of legs. (1)

One year on her North Indian Tour, Amma stopped near the side of a river and was swimming with all of her children. As Amma was individually washing her children's faces, suddenly there was a commotion. Two of the brahmacharinis had been carried away by the current and began flailing in the water. In the heat of the moment, they started pulling at each other and dragging each other under. One Western devotee dove down and with much effort pulled them back up and over to the shore. Amma asked everyone to come out of the water immediately. But even after everyone had done so, Amma remained at the shore with a worried look on her face. Though everyone kept telling her that there was no one left out there, Amma repeatedly insisted, "One of my children is still in the water?" However, no one emerged, and after a head count it was seen that everyone present that day had in fact come out of the water. Finally, Amma walked over to one longtime Western devotee and said, "Be very careful.'' This woman didn't know how to

swim, and began to worry due to Amma's warning. Later that night she wrote Amma's words in her diary.

A few days later, this same woman talked with her father, who had been vacationing in the Caribbean. He told her that during his vacation, he'd had a brush with death. A few days before, he had been swimming in the Caribbean Ocean when suddenly a riptide had carried him out to sea. The wave had been pulling him under, and he had desperately called out to his friend to save him. But there was no way for his friend to make it out to him. Realizing the inevitability of his death, the man called out to Amma. Finally, he stopped struggling and surrendered to his fate. To his amazement, the waves simply carried him back to the shore and deposited him on the beach.

When she compared the timing of her fathers dose call with the incident at the river in India, the woman knew that the two events had happened simultaneously, and she understood that it was her father Amma was referring to when she said, "One of my children is still in the water."

Recently a television news team visited Amma's ashram. They decided they wanted to interview one of the ashram residents assigned to co-ordinate their visit. During the interview, he shared that before meeting Amma, his primary concern had been to increase his own comfort and happiness, but that now, inspired by Amma's example, he just wanted to serve the world. After the news crew left the ashram.

the young man asserted to Amma that he had not wanted to step in front of the camera, but that the correspondent had insisted on interviewing him. Having heard about his on-camera comments, Amma replied, “If you have truly offered your life to the world, then there will be no ego left in you. Whether you are behind the camera or in front of the camera will not make any difference." Amma’s flawless logic left the young man speechless. But Amma was nor finished with him. She added, “Anyway, another camera is always watching you."

This reminds me of an incident in the earliest days of the ashram. One of the newly joined ashram residents was telling Amma about the problems he was undergoing. “Don’t worry, my son, Amma is always with you," she consoled him.

“I know that," the young man quipped. “That’s what worries me the most!"

Long ago, we learned that we cannot hide anything from Amma. One day, a devotee offered a bag of biscuits to Amma. Without opening the bag, Amma called another of the ashram residents and told him, “Son, keep these biscuits aside; we will share them tonight." The young man took the bag and went to his hut. There he opened the bag and found five packets of biscuits. He took one packet and hid it in the roof of his hut between the coconut leaves.

In the evening, Amma asked for the biscuits to distribute as prasad. The young man brought the bag, minus the packet he had stashed in his hut. “Son, there are only four packets here; where is the fifth one?”

The young man didn’t say anything, but stood frozen like a deer caught in headlights. Finally Amma stood up, proceeded to his hut, went straight to the hiding-place in the roof and retrieved the missing packet. Then she told the whole story during the meal, explaining that she had given the young man the bag of biscuits as a test of his selflessness. And though he had failed the test, he learned the lesson—from that day onward, the young man never again took anything that was not his.

Several years ago, a devotee and her teenaged daughter were on their way to visit Amma’s ashram in India. They were in the air, midway between Singapore and Trivandrum, where they would take a taxi for the three-hour drive along India’s western coastline to Amma’s ashram. They had finished their in-flight meal and the flight attendant was just clearing their trays. Suddenly, the plane was gripped by a terrible turbulence—a violent shaking, left and right, up and down.

And then the devotee’s stomach dropped, as the plane began to plummet toward the earth. The plane did not dive, but just—dropped, from an altitude of 30,000 feet

to 20,000 feet in less than a minute. Then, for one brief moment, everything was normal. Just long enough for the passengers to begin looking around at each other, and to begin to sigh with relief. And then the plane entered a nosedive.

The oxygen masks dropped in front of the passengers, but nobody reached for them. The devotee and her daughter looked up at the flight attendant, hoping for a reassuring look. What they saw was abject fear. Amma's children began to pray.

And a kind of peace came over them. The devotee's daughter later recalled that as she looked out the window and saw the fast approach of the deep blue sea, she did not feel fear.

Finally, at 10,000 feet above the water, the plane leveled out. A few minutes later, the pilot's voice came over the loudspeaker, his voice tinged with a nervous relief. "Everything's going to be ok. We kindly request everyone to remain seated... and not to jump our of the plane." The pilot never explained what had caused them to enter the nosedive or how they had managed to pull out of it. They landed safely and without further incident.

When they arrived at the ashram, the devotee and her daughter went for Amma's darshan and told her what had happened. Amma did nor say anything but just held them dose for what seemed like an extra long time. Later,

Amma's attendant told the devotee Amma had been in a very abstract mood before coming down for the morning darshan. She had been rocking back and forth, murmur- ing, "So much shaking, so much shaking... " And she had said the devotees name.

Even in the objective realm of reality, there is so much Amma can see which is invisible to our eyes. During Amma's first world tour, the night of her arrival in Santa Fe, Amma stayed awake throughout the night. In the morn- ing she explained that she had seen many strange-looking subtle beings who had come to receive her blessings. When asked what they looked like, Amma replied that they had the torso of an animal and the legs of a human being.

It so happened that in one of the rooms of the house where Amma was staying, there were a number of figurines that exactly matched Amma's description. Though the owner of the house had kept them on display more as a decora- tion, it turned out that they were the images of the gods, or *kachinas,* worshipped by the local tribes of the Native Americans. Hearing Amma's comments, they understood that these kachinas were not just ornamental figurines, as they are regarded by most of the world today, but subtle beings that actually exist and can be seen by those who have such subtle perception.

Amma has revealed her deeper intuitive understanding of the spiritual tradition in India, as well. For example,

although for many centuries the custom in India has prohibited women from performing the ritual worship in temples, Amma herself envisioned a new type of temple and worship, and has inaugurated about 18 such temples over the past 20 years. Some of the brahmacharinis, including Westerners who are normally prohibited from even enter- ing the inner sanctum of a temple, have since been taught how to perform the traditional ritual forms of worship at the temple. After their training was complete, Amma then sent these brahmacharinis to various branch ashrams. At the time, some people asked what scriptural injunctions Amma could offer in support of all this. Amma replied that the authority of the scriptures comes from the words of the mahatmas, and as a result those very same mahatmas have the authority to make necessary modifications over the ages to suit the needs of the time and place.

In the *Bhagavad Gita,* Lord Krishna says,

yavan artha udapane sarvatah samplutodake
tavam sarvesu vedesu brohmanasya vijanatah

To an enlightened being, all the Vedas are as useful as a tank when there is a flood everywhere.

(2.46)

This does not mean that true masters will not follow or respect the scriptures; but they don't need the scriptures as a guide. They have already attained the Supreme Knowledge described by the scriptures.

With her universal vision, Amma can easily see past the superficial differences in the world's religious traditions. That is why she never asks anyone to change their religion but to go deeper into their own faith, discover its essential principles and live according to them.

During one of Amma's American tours, the tour staff put on an extended collection of songs and dances representing the major religious traditions of the world. But the person who would have represented a particular religion had fallen sick. Nobody noticed their absence, bur when the performances had come to an end, Amma pointed out that one major religion had been left out. Even in the midst of giving darshan, she gave a performance of her own—singing a devotional song from that tradition. Only then was the medley of the world's fiuths complete.

More than a dozen years ago. before global warming and the increasing disharmony of natural rhythms took center stage in the public's consciousness, Amma's deep insight into the workings of Mother Nature was the basis of her warning that humanity could not continue down its present path. "Now there is no longer any rain when it is supposed to rain. If it does rain, there is either too little or too much, and it comes too early or too late. It is the same with sunshine. Nowadays human beings are trying to exploit Nature. This is why there are floods, droughts and earthquakes, and everything is being destroyed.''

She even saw a hidden cause for Natures increasing disharmony: she pointed out that even more harmful than the black smoke emitted from factories was the dark clouds of selfishness, hatred and anger within the hearts of human beings, and that not only humanity's actions but their thoughts and words have a direct impact on Nature. “There is a tremendous decline in the quality of life. Many people have lost faith. They do not feel any love and compassion, and the team spirit of working together, hand in hand, for the good of all, has been lost. This will have a bad effect on Nature. Nature will withdraw all her blessings and turn against humankind. Unimaginable will be Natures reaction if humanity continues like this.”

And even now, Amma says that Nature is still very agitated—we are by no means out of the woods. Amma says that without a significant change in the behavior and attitudes of human beings, Nature will continue to wreak her havoc. She often asks all her devotees to pray that the cool, gentle breeze of divine grace blows away the dark clouds of anger, hatred and negativity within the hearts of human beings.

And recently, she has been suggesting a whole range of concrete, practical steps—from planting trees to carpooling, from saving water and paper to recycling plastic—that have already begun to be implemented by her devotees all over

the world. This will have a tremendously positive impact on Nature and help to restore our planet to her original state of harmony and natural order.

There is an ancient temple in Chidambaram, Tamil Nadu, that highlights the expansive vision of Sanatana Dharma. In that temple, instead of having God's darshan through the viewing of an idol, one actually enters into God. There is a physical space in the temple—*akasha linga*—that itself is considered God manifest. So one enters the room and literally enters God, walks through God, breathes God, feels the mystery that is God inside and out. The temple is a teaching about God's all-pervasive nature.

This has been Amma's vision from the moment of her birth. Amma says she came into this world clearly seeing how everything in and around her is saturated with God—how, inside and out, there is nothing but one all-expansive divine consciousness.

It's not that Amma doesn't see the differences between the plants, the animals, the trees, rivers and stars, the people that come in and out of her arms. Amma sees all of this just as you and I do, but she also sees how all these seemingly disparate things are in fact one, how the ultimate subatomic particles, as it were, are God and God alone.

This is the secret behind the vastness of Amma's compassion. It has no limits because Amma's sense of Self has

no limits; her sense of Self is all-pervading, like space. In Amma's mind, there is no boundary point where she stops and we begin.

This non-duality is Amma's vision, and the result is that when Amma sees someone suffering, she immediately reaches out to comfort them. Why? Because she does not see them as separate from her. When she sees someone without a house, she wants to give them a house. When she sees someone without means to secure a proper education, she wants to give them a proper education. When she sees someone without food, she wants to feed them. When she sees someone without love, she wants to love them. For Amma, the impulse to help others is as natural as the impulse to wipe the tears that fall from her own eyes. For Amma, there is no difference. This is why the true masters like Amma serve the world—why, as Amma says, they live for their disciples and devotees—because seeing everyone and everything as themselves, their love and compassion ceaselessly flow out to the entire universe.

This past summer, during a question-and-answer session on one of her retreats, a devotee innocently told Amma, "I've never seen eyes like yours—they seem to contain the whole universe. Have you ever thought about your eyes?"

Amma's reply was short, sweet and deeply profound. "I sec my eyes through yours," she responded to the questioner. "I see myself through you."

We can never really understand what it is like to see the world through Amma's eyes. But it is obvious that wherever she looks, Amma sees more than we see. She sees deeper into the situation, into the heart of the person, and into the cause of the problem at hand. She sees beings which are invisible to us, and she sees events unfolding on the other side of the world. She sees beyond dogma into the unified heart of the world's religions, and beyond cultural differences to see all human beings as one universal family. She sees through white lies, she sees hidden motivations, and she sees the pure at heart. She sees the actions and thoughts of her devotees and disciples, and she sees beyond ugliness to the inner beauty of the innocent heart. Wherever she looks, she sees God alone. Finally, she sees nothing but her Self everywhere. It is as it always has been, and always will be.

Glossary

Advaita - Literally, "not two." Refers to non-dualism, the fundamental principle of Vedanta, the highest spiritual philosophy of Sanatana Dharma.

Amrita Ku terrain - Mata Amritanandamayi Maths housing project providing free homes for very poor families. Over 40,000 houses have so far been built and given away throughout India.

Amrita Vidyalayam - Primary schools established and administered by the Mata Amritanandamayi Math, dedicated to providing value-based education. At present there are 53 Amrita Vidyalayam schools throughout India.

Amritapuri - The international headquarters of Mata Amritanandamayi Math, located at Amma's birthplace in Kerala, India.

ananda - Bliss.

archana - Worship.

atman - The Self, or Consciousness.

AUM - (Also "Om") According to the Vedic scriptures, this is the primordial sound in the universe and the seed of creation. All other sounds arise out of Om and resolve back into Om.

bhajan - Devotional song.

brahmachari - A celibate male disciple who practices spiritual disciplines under amaster. Brahmacharini is the female equivalent.

Brahman - The Ultimate Truth beyond any attributes. The omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent substratum of the universe.

darshan - An audience with a holy personor a vision of the Divine. Animas darshan is uniquely administered in the form of a motherly hug.

Devi Bhava - “The Divine Mood of Devi." The state in which Amma reveals her oneness and identity with the Divine Mother.

dharma - In Sanskrit, dharma means “that which upholds (creation)." Most commonly, it indicates the harmony of the universe. Other meanings include: righteousness, duty, responsibility.

gopi - The gopis were milkmaids who lived in Krishna’s childhood home of Vrindavan. 'Ihey were Krishna’s ardent devotees. They exemplify the most intense love for God.

jivanmukti — Liberation while still living in the body.

jiva, or **jivaima** — Individual soul. According to Advaita Vedanta, the jivatma is, in fact, not a limited individual soul, but one and the same as Brahman, also referred to as the Paramatma, the one Supreme Soul that constitutes both the material and intelligent cause of the universe.

jnana - Knowledge.

Jnani - A person who has realized God or the Self. One who knows the Truth.

Kauravas - The 100 children of King Dhritarashtra and Queen Gandhari, of whom the unrighteous Duryodhana was the eldest. The Kauravas were the enemies of their cousins, the virtuous Pandavas, with whom they fought in the Mahabharata War.

Mahabharata - One of the two great Indian historical epics, the other being the Ramayana. It is a great treatise on dharma. The story deals mainly with the conflict between the righteous Pandavas and the unrighteous Kauravas and the great

war at Kurukshctra. Containing 100,000 verses, it is the longest epic poem in the world, written around 3.200 B.C. by the sage Veda Vyasa.

mahatma - Literally, "great soul." Though the term is now used more broadly, in this book mahatma refers to one who abides in the knowledge that he or she is one with the Universal Self, or Atma.

Mata Amritanandamayi Devi - The name given to Amma by her disciples, meaning Mother of Immortal Bliss, often prefixed with Sri to denote auspiciousness.

Mata Amritanandamayi Math (MAM) - Amma's spiritual and humanitarian organization. MAM's charitable social services cross all barriers of nationality, race, caste and religion, and have drawn the attention of the world community. In 2005, the United Nations gave MAM Special Consultative Status in recognition of its disaster relief and broad-scale humanitarian efforts.

maya - Illusion. According to Advaita Vedanta, it is maya that causes the jivatma to erroneously identify itself with the body, mind and intellect, instead of its true identity the Paramatma.

rnithya - Changing, therefore impermanent. Also, illusory or untrue. According to Vedanta, the entire visible world is rnithya.

Onam - Kerala's Harvest Festival, recalling a golden era when its people lived in perfect harmony under the benevolent reign of King Mahabali.

Pandavas - Five sons of King Pandu and the heroes of the epic Mahabharata.

Paramatma - Supreme Being.

prasad - Blessed offering or gift from a holy person or temple, often in the form of food.

puja - Ritualistic or ceremonial worship.

Puranas - Through concrete examples, myths, stories, legends, lives of saints, kings and great men and women, allegories and chronicles of great historical events, the Puranas aim to make the teachings of the Vedas available to all.

rishis - Self-realized seers or sages who perceive the mantras in their meditation.

samadhi - Literally, “cessation of all mental vacillations." A transcendental state in which the individual self is united with the Supreme Self.

samsara - The cycle of birth and death.

Sanatana Dharma - “The Eternal Way of Life." The original and traditional name for Hinduism.

satsang - Being in communion with the Supreme Truth. Also being in the company of the mahatmas, listening to a spiritual talk or discussion, and participating in spiritual practices in a group setting.

unniyappam - Traditional fried sweet of Kerala.

Vedanta - Literally, “The end of the Vedas." It refers to the Upanishads, which deal with the subject of Brahman, the Supreme Truth, and the path to realize that Truth.

EYE OF WISDOM

"One can never *really expect to understand or explain exactly how anyone else sees the world, let alone a spiritual master of* Amma's *caliber. And yet,* in 30 *years of* living *with Amma, sitting at her feet, watching her from afar, and* receiving her *guidance on matters small and* large, this much *I know for certain: hers* is *truly a vision from beyond beyond anything we* can *comprehend, beyond anything we have dreamed, beyond any* thing at *all.* Certainly it is *beyond words.* Even still, Amma cries to explain it co us, *and we would do* uvll to try to understand."

—From Eye of Wisdom

With characteristic wit, lively examples and profound insights gleaned from three decades as Amma's disciple, Swami Ramakrishnananda examines the difference between the way most human beings see the world and the vision of the true spiritual masters. Finally we begin to understand that Amma's vision of oneness is in fact, the essence *of* spirituality. It is a vision Amma wants for us all, because she knows that perceiving this reality is the only thing that will bring us peace—both as individuals and as a world.